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FINAL VERDICT

STREET FIGHTER V

- Essential gameplay breakdown
- Ono reveals his revolutionary vision
- Every new challenger tested

THE RISE OF TOYS-TO-LIFE

We explore the biggest phenomenon in gaming

25 GAMES OF THE YEAR

The essential games you need to play right now

INSIDE EVERY ESSENTIAL VR GAME



VALKYRIE

THE FIRST VR BLOCKBUSTER

The epic new space shooter everyone will want to play

RELEASE THE BEASTS

Why Far Cry Primal is the most exciting game in the series yet

HIGHLIGHTS

TEKKEN 7 ■ UNCHARTED 4: A THIEF'S END ■ NIOH ■ NI NO KUNI II: REVENANT KINGDOM
STAR CITIZEN ■ HITMAN ■ OVERWATCH ■ DREAMS ■ GRAVITY RUSH 2 ■ AMPLITUDE
DIRT RALLY ■ GALAK-Z ■ MINI METRO ■ GAME OF THRONES ■ PRINCE OF PERSIA



It seems only right that we should kick off 2016 proper with what is without doubt the most exciting advance in the gaming industry coming this year: the arrival of VR. We've offered our verdict on VR once before and obviously we're excited by its potential, but what it needs now is for some of that potential to start proving itself. In steps *EVE: Valkyrie* to make the case that the headset revolution is something you need to get involved with.

I remain a precariously perched fence-sitter in the debate over the likely success or failure of virtual reality as a consumer experience. The tech is impressive and powerful, the development teams behind some of the titles on the way have great pedigrees and fantastic track records, but is that going to be enough?

I fear that the opening salvo of VR's attack will be little more than demos and concepts. What many will be hoping is that the likes of Rift, PlayStation VR or Vive can pull a Wii and launch with their equivalents of *Wii Sports*, capturing imaginations and creating a new phenomenon for the industry. I suspect things may take a little more time than that.

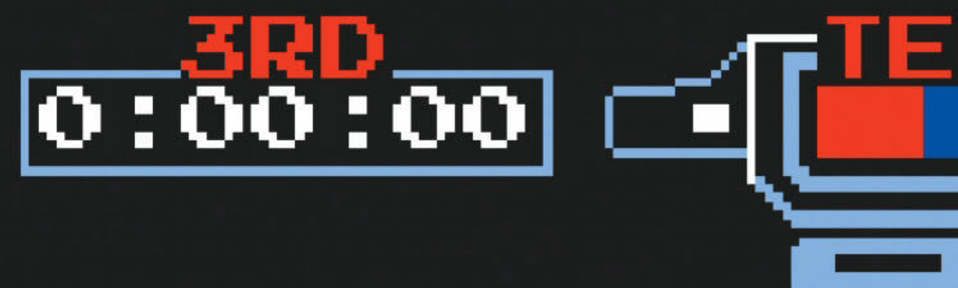
However, if there's a game that can prove the living room potential of these devices, it is CCP's epic space shooter. The immersion, action and fidelity of this experience is unlike anything we've experienced with VR to date and that's why, for us, it's the must-play game for VR in 2016. If this is the first benchmark, the year should be a good one.

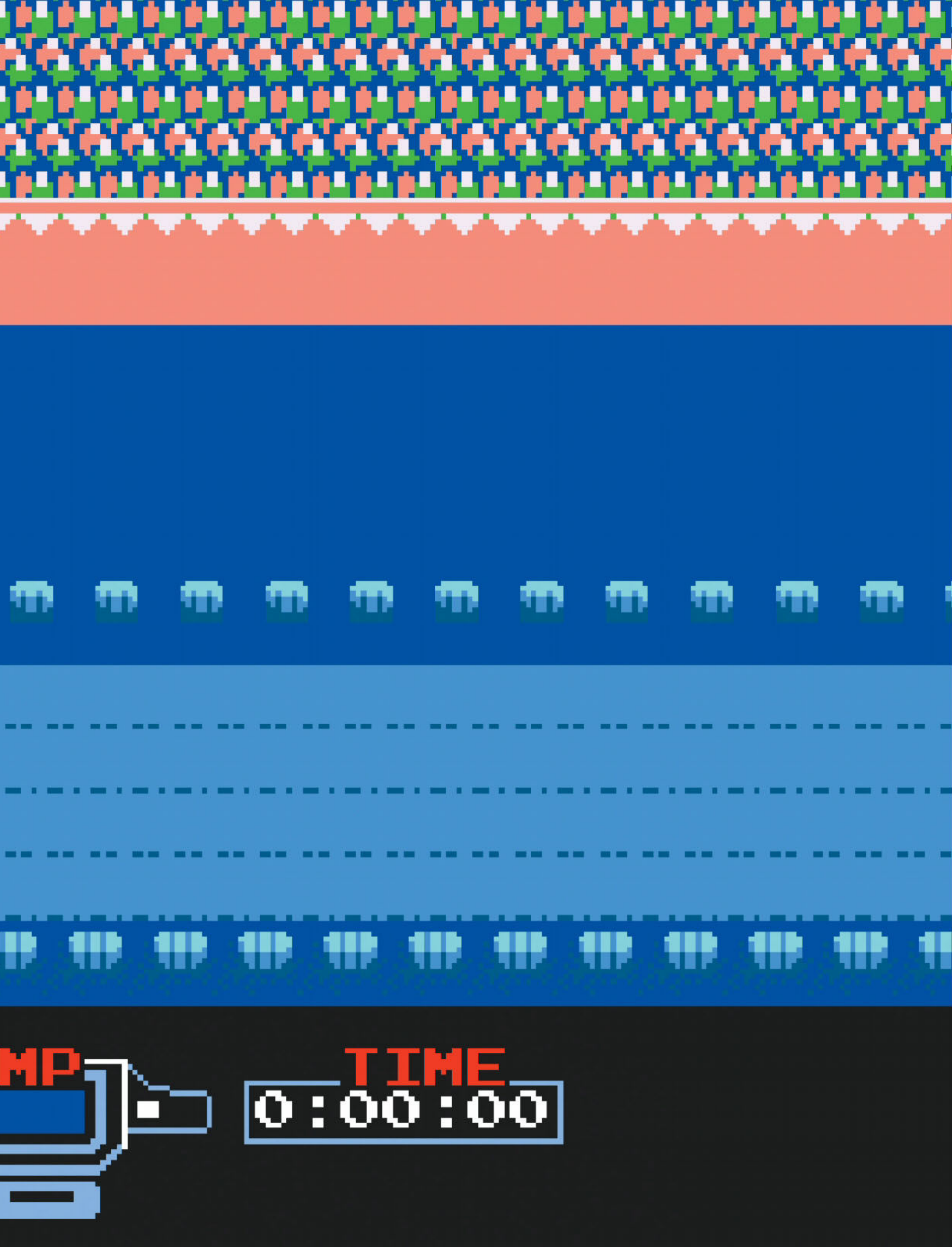
Jon Gordon

Jonathan Gordon
EDITOR



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Contents

www.gamestm.co.uk 170 | 16

PREVIEWS



48 Quantum Break

FAVOURITES



RETRO



54 Far Cry Primal

DISCUSS



66 Street Fighter V

FEATURES

REVIEWS



18 Tekken 7



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Turn to page 82
40 Feature
EVE: VALKYRIE
Discover why CCP Games' space epic is the first true VR blockbuster



THE FOX HAS FLED HIS CAGE

What happens when Hideo Kojima joins forces with Sony?

→ Hideo Kojima wasn't on holiday after all; he was 'quietly' separating from his relationship with Konami after 30 years. But what will the enigmatic creator do now that he is free? **games**™ investigates…

Some will tell you that a picture tells a thousand words, but what would those same people say about a screen grab of Andrew House's beaming face? Because from where we're sitting, the president and Group CEO of Sony Computer Entertainment is wearing a smile that will sell a thousand consoles; maybe more, *definitely* more. That's because he's sat next to the greying fox himself, Hideo Kojima, free of his Konami ties and able to roam wherever his creativity might take him. Which, to be more precise, has been straight into the warm embrace of Sony.

"PlayStation's history is one of game innovation and great new franchises," said House in a glowing announcement. "Hideo Kojima has been a huge part of that history, and we are therefore delighted that he has chosen to bring his brand new project to life in partnership with PlayStation. We look forward to working with him on an exciting new game and warmly welcome him to the PlayStation family."

That's right, the enigmatic *Metal Gear* creator is a free agent again for the first time in 30 years and he's elected to begin this new chapter in his career with PlayStation. This is colossal news for both developer and publisher: Kojima, no doubt overjoyed to be developing an exclusive for a console that 35 million gamers around the world already call home; Sony, surely ecstatic the PlayStation division just pulled perhaps the biggest coup in entertainment of the decade. Kojima has not only established his own independent studio, but he will also be looking to deliver an entirely new IP that can stand the test of time. "I will be taking on a new challenge by establishing my own independent studio, and I am thrilled to be able to embark on this journey with PlayStation, who I have continued to work with all these past years," says Kojima as he announced the rebirth of Kojima Productions. "I cannot wait to deliver, with PlayStation, a game that will become a compelling franchise."

The dust is finally beginning to settle on the year long, headline-dominating dispute that saw Konami throw a volley of baffling toxicity in the direction of its former vice president. Now we have one of the most innovative and influential developers in the world set free to *really* express himself.

DATA STREAM → LEGENDARY HALF-LIFE WRITER MARC LAIDLAW HAS RETIRED FROM VALVE

Contents

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Inset The future of *Metal Gear Solid* remains unclear now; Konami has already said it would be hiring for another game in the series, but it's unclear how fans would react to a Kojima-less instalment.

If you thought the *Metal Gear Solid* series represented the unfiltered genius (see also: insanity) of Hideo Kojima, then you'd better strap yourself in – it sounds like we haven't seen anything yet. "When working in big companies, especially Japanese companies,

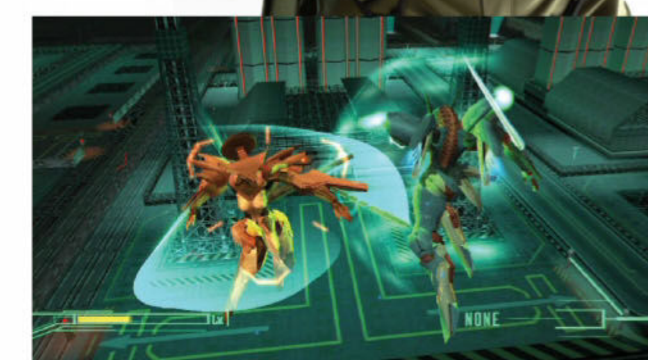
Right Kojima had been honing the *Metal Gear* formula across different formats for years, but he always seemed keen to try something new given the chance.

> "I will be establishing my own independent studio, and I am thrilled to be able to embark on this journey with PlayStation"

every little thing has to be approved beforehand, and you need paperwork to do anything," Kojima would later remark to *The New York Times*. "Now that I'm independent, I can do what I want with much more speed. I don't need to invest time in unnecessary presentations. I shoulder the risk."

In fact, Kojima seems to be revelling in the potential risk of his PlayStation 4 console exclusive. With the publishing rights to *Metal Gear, Silent Hills, Zone Of The Enders, Boktai, Policenauts* and *Snatcher* all remaining with Konami, Kojima is striking out with "something completely new" and, to be honest, the prospect of this is also a little terrifying. "We are Homo Ludens, we are those who play," begins Kojima in his company mission statement. "We find one another and compete with one another. We laugh together and cry together, all while

Below Little is known about the new project, though legendary *MGS* artist Yoji Shinkawa has confirmed that it will have characters and mechs, which is a start.



Reader Reaction

Hideo Kojima opens a new chapter

With Hideo Kojima leaving *Metal Gear Solid* behind, we took it to you, the games™ readers, to discuss whether it was a good thing the enigmatic creator is striking out on his own. Here's what you had to say...

Are you happy Hideo Kojima is leaving MGS behind?

- Yes – time for something new
- No – I wanted a sequel to The Phantom Pain

"I can't say I'm surprised, though I would have liked to see a sequel to *The Phantom Pain*, it didn't really wrap up in a satisfying fashion." Nick Sparks [Facebook]

"It'll be interesting to see what his new team can create without Konami financing him. Though Sony aren't exactly hard up either." Alfie Kirk [Facebook]

"I can't wait to see what Kojima is working on next, I'm sure it will be proper crazy though" @Eve3208

"This is the best we could have hoped for, there's never been a better time to own a PS4" @Mr_BQBoog

"This is where Kojima might finally slip up. He won't have the team size or funds he's used to. Excited though" @DirtyDC7

"Look what he did with a small team on *P.T.*, this will probably be just as interesting!" @alcoveredinbees


SONY'S KAZ HIRAI HAS STATED THAT AROUND 100 GAMES ARE PLANNED FOR PLAYSTATION VR






> "The publishing rights to Metal Gear, Silent Hills, Zone Of The Enders, Boktai, Policenauts and Snatcher all remain with Konami"

playing together. Our experiences bind us and liberate us. To share our most valuable experiences, we create stories, invent tools, and evolve the art of play. Play has been our ally since the dawn of civilisation."

There's a lot to digest from that statement. It goes on in this fashion, promoting the idea that those who play are simultaneously those who create. If we weren't already inherently familiar with Kojima's directorial and writing style (not to mention his fondness for blurring the lines between the Hollywood blockbuster and interactive entertainment) we would maybe make the reasonable assumption that he would be looking to build the next *Minecraft* for Sony – the publisher still surely upset it let Mojang slip through its fingers to its greatest rival.

That probably won't be the case though, because artist and long-time Kojima collaborator Yoji Shinkawa has already confirmed that he's working on the concept and designs for the currently-untitled game's characters and mechs. Another classic Kojima hallmark: mechs. They obviously played a huge part in *Metal Gear* and *Zone Of The Enders*, not to mention their underlying technology appearing in the likes of both *Policenauts* and *Snatcher*. *Minecraft* with mechs this (probably) will not be, though; Kojima and Shinkawa have both expressed a desire to flex their creative muscles in ways they haven't been able to at Konami. Shinkawa, in particular, is eager to create original designs that can be more iconic than his work on *Metal Gear Solid*, which is a lofty ambition indeed.

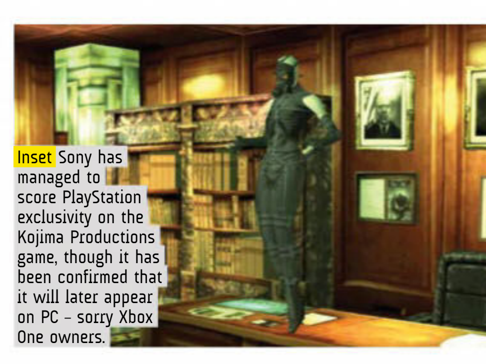
There is another telling line in Kojima's mind-shattering company statement: "through the invention of play, our new evolution awaits". From the little information that's out there, it seems clear that this new iteration of Kojima Productions won't be creating anything on the scale of *Metal Gear Solid* – nor will it have the multi-million dollar budgets that it's been used to working with. Kojima wants to keep things small and "evolve the art of play", perhaps indicating that we are more likely to see a game – at least initially – on the scale of *Metal Gear Solid V: Ground Zeroes* or *Silent Hills/P.T.* Both were envisioned as windows into larger projects; short, high-quality



Above The Kojima Productions logo doesn't reveal a lot, though some people reportedly see a Centurion's helmet, while others can see a chicken hidden away. What can we say, people see what they want to see.



Above Sadly, Konami retains all of the rights to the games Hideo Kojima has put his name to over the past three decades, though who's to say they couldn't outsource one to his studio in the future.



Inset Sony has managed to score PlayStation exclusivity on the Kojima Productions game, though it has been confirmed that it will later appear on PC – sorry Xbox One owners.



Inset Due to the small size of the studio, we expect Kojima Productions to put out smaller games, like *P.T.*, that are large in concept and ambition.

DATA STREAM → SUPER MARIO MAKER HAS TEAMED UP WITH SOUTHWEST AIR TO RELEASE ITS OWN LEVEL

experiences that gave the development team a space to experiment with new mechanics and systems. They were opportunities to innovate and evolve videogames through play; it's safe to assume we will be receiving more of the same from Kojima Productions.

We will, however, be waiting a while. As it stands, Kojima Productions has but four-staff members and no office. Hideo Kojima and Yoji Shinkawa are joined by Kenichiro Imaizumi (former producer at Konami), and Kojima's personal assistant, Ayako Terashima – well, somebody needs to tell him to stop tweeting about food and to start getting back to work. The studio is hiring, though: 23 positions are open as Kojima Productions begins its search for everything from character and environmental artists; lead, game, AI, physics and network programmers; to game and level designers. When we said it'll be a while before anything of this project is revealed, we weren't kidding. But for now we can exist happily knowing that Kojima is free to create again – free of Konami and fired up to prove he doesn't need Solid Snake to change the state of the gaming world all over again.

PSYCHONAUTS 2 WAS FUNDED WITH THREE DAYS TO SPARE ON FIG, WITH $3.8 MILLION PLEDGED



"Players want to actually work for their success, not just buy it"

Save money on MMOs… move to Japan

We often hear about how Japan has a culture built upon honour and respect, but it's not all that often we get to see this first-hand in gaming. Sure, games like *Monster Hunter* would never let you simply pay for end-game gear – you have to earn it, to *deserve* it – but it isn't until you find yourself in a digital world with a largely player-managed economy that you actually see what this means.

I got the *FFXIV* bug hard again over the last few months and recently, a patch dropped that unlocked the next tier for the game's ultimate Relic weapons. While I'm only just getting back into the game and not even close to these beautiful things yet, I kept a close eye on the chat feed as my Free Company complained about the extortionate prices being demanded on our EU server for the key items needed to walk this new path and be among the first to have the 'best weapons' in the game. One guy pointed out that the Japanese servers had the same items listed at a fraction of the price, before stating that he was off to switch servers just to get the job done – a £30, three-day round trip, just to avoid the greed that was choking our servers.

His stories upon his return – Relic in hand – confirmed that it wasn't just this new wave of gear that was being grossly inflated by the hard-wired capitalists of Zodiark. *Everything* was cheaper on the other side. It was then that I realised the cultural impact of this news. It'd only take one or two high-rollers to buy up supplies for an entire server and set their own prices in line with our own cash-obsessed bubble, but that hadn't happened. It still hasn't. When it'd be so easy for the waters to be muddied by greed and yet prices still stayed low, it can only be that Japan's respect and honour-based culture is what is keeping those bank-breaking prices at bay. Players want to actually work for their success, not just buy it. People want to know their belongings are the result of their own blood, sweat and tears rather than just something they threw their wallets at. It's refreshing to discover, particularly from a game where I've been guilty of chucking virtual cash at shortcomings on occasion, that our own greed-based culture isn't all-pervasive and that some gaming communities are still free from the 'money comes first' attitude that already pollutes out everyday lives.

Me? Well, I'm going to go off and work on my crafting and gathering classes until I'm at a point where I can make those same multi-million-Gil commodities my friend ran off to virtual Japan to pick up from the Duty Free. Then, I'm going to sell them at a massive loss to try and drag our own obscene prices down. Let's see how this goes…

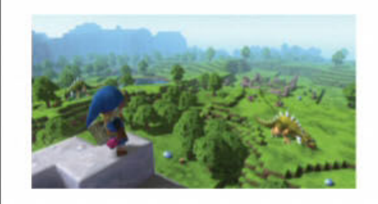


Luke Albigés is Editor of **Play** magazine and won't be switching servers any time soon… but mainly because of the lag

Import Watch

→ Dragon Quest Builders

How do you get Japanese players on board with the whole *Minecraft* phenomenon? Easy – take the idea, chuck in some Slimes and tell players they'll be exploring the 'bad ending' of the original *Dragon Quest*, which celebrates its 30th anniversary this year. It's got a little more structure and a few more JRPG idiosyncrasies than its Western counterpart, sure, but the premise and visual style remains (outside of the series' familiar characters and monsters, at least), so it'll be interesting to see how this goes down… and whether or not Square sees fit to try it out on a global audience that already clearly loves the idea.





THE HIGHLY ANTICIPATED PLATINUM GAMES' XBOX ONE EXCLUSIVE SCALEBOUND HAS BEEN DELAYED UNTIL 2017

Hoverboard

Self Balancing Scooter

UK STORE - **UK 3 PIN PLUG** -12 MONTH WARRANTY



> "It's important that we do not forget the pioneers who got us this far and are sadly fading"

The bright, burning torch for gaming in 2016

It's with a delightful Machiavellian pleasure that I write this column in 2016, safe in the knowledge that the modern world continues along with eSports burning brightly inside it. This achievement should not be underestimated; it's quite frankly incredible that the world of gaming has succeeded where Vince McMahon and his ill-fated XFL, American Football spin-off could not. Over the years, many have attempted to launch new or revamped sports to compete with various established brands, leagues and national pastimes, and fallen flat on their faces in trying.

That is not to say it has been plain sailing for eSports. There was a period not so long ago when, lost on the horizon, we ended up in a sea of sharks attracted to the taste of blood in the water. There was fresh money to be made in these unsullied seas. Unfortunately, paying out prize monies was the last thing on the agenda of certain opportunistic folk. I should point out that these type of moments occur in the history of all blossoming industries; sometimes those riding the wave of success are only interested in personal gain and short-term success, expecting the trend itself to peter out. I am pleased to report that the fledgling eSports industry has managed to rid itself of this image rather quickly and although these issues still surface now and then, they appear to be only minor passing storms.

As we enter this New Year, we enter exciting uncharted waters with heavyweight gaming alumni such as Peter Moore now taking the lead for EA as it makes its first serious move into the eSports arena. Not to be outdone, Activision Blizzard has followed EA's lead and bought seminal American eSports company MLG to add another colour to the palette of 2016, already shaping up to be the greatest year to date for the prominence and exposure of pro gaming.

But as these heavyweights enter the battlefield to bring undoubted skill, craft and most importantly experience to the world of eSports, it's important that we do not forget the pioneers that got us this far and are sadly fading. The first 15 years of eSports were a very tribal affair, with originally around 20 different companies pioneering competitive gaming around the world. Each of these groups of people had at least one shining light, a beacon who would bring something special and new to what was an exciting time.

Being spurred on by competition is one of the main reasons behind the exceptional growth in pro gaming. It would be fair to say that these rivalries were not always friendly, sometimes incredibly bitter, but without them we wouldn't be entering another year as the envy of games, sports and media alike. And yet, these pioneer companies have dwindled to a handful, and over the last year some of the great flagbearers of our time have sadly disappeared forever. I only hope I am not next.



Paul Kent has over 16 years experience in the eSports industry and is currently eSports Director at the UK's leading eSports company Gfinity

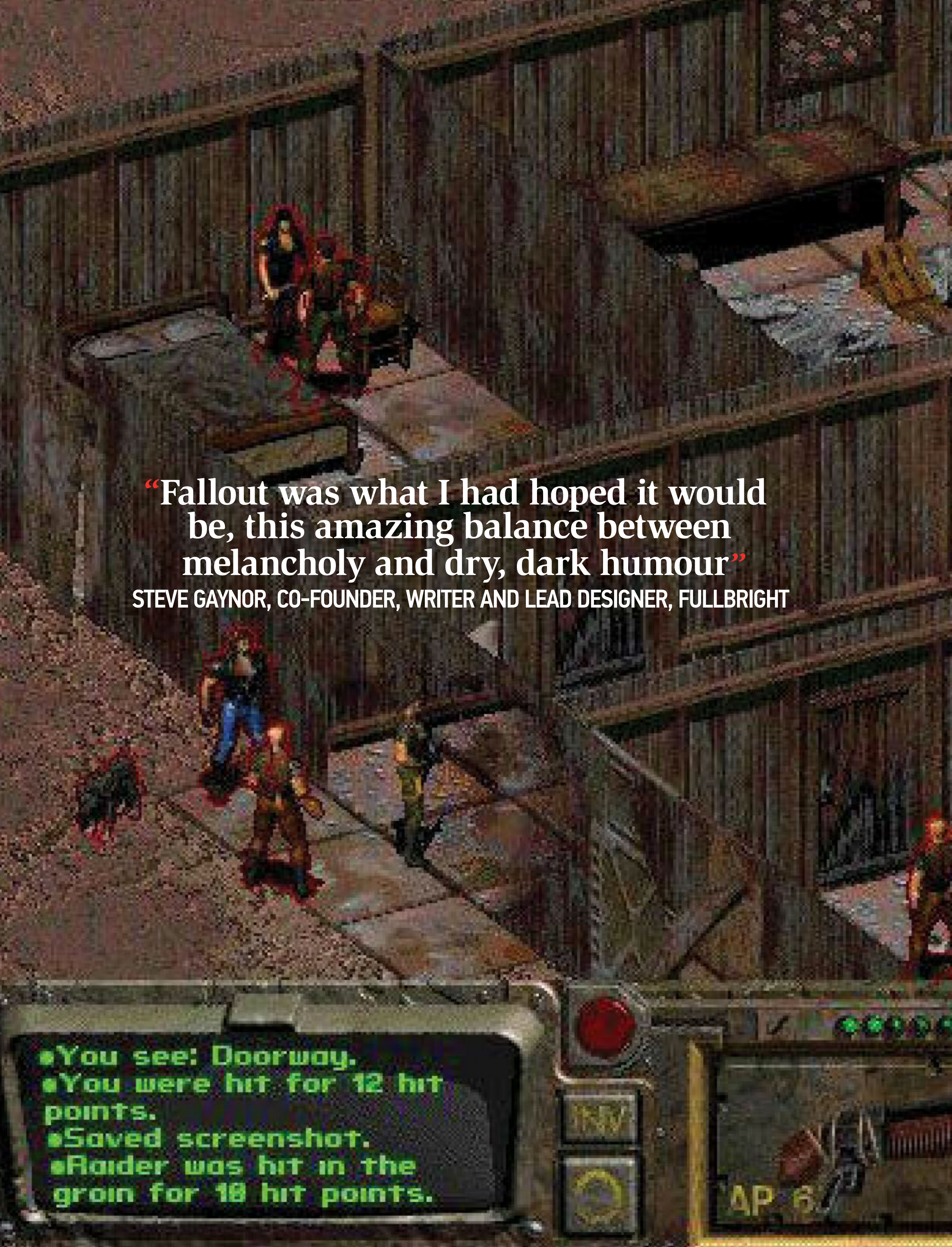


The decision to move Peter Moore to head its eSports division is evidence enough that EA is looking to get more out of this industry for titles like *Battlefield Hardline*.



Activision will be looking to break new ground in the pro gaming world with bigger *COD* competitions and new titles from Blizzard like *Overwatch*.

505 GAMES CONFIRMS SPACE-WALKING SIM ADR1FT WILL LAUNCH ON VR AND OTHER PLATFORMS 28 MARCH



> “Fallout was what I had hoped it would be, this amazing balance between melancholy and dry, dark humour”

STEVE GAYNOR, CO-FOUNDER, WRITER AND LEAD DESIGNER, FULLBRIGHT



WHY I ♥... FALLOUT

STEVE GAYNOR, CO-FOUNDER, WRITER AND LEAD DESIGNER, FULLBRIGHT

"It was just one of those times when you feel really lucky to have been there for the birth of something that would legitimately be considered a classic. It was what I had hoped it would be, this amazing balance between melancholy and dry, dark humour. Fallout *had that perfect tone of 'This is a dark, bleak world, but life always has some absurdity to it and that's going to be a part of the experience as well. It's not just going to be this po-faced grim experience even though it's in a very dark world.'*

The player freedom of how you could explore that world and how you decided to place yourself within it and the fact that if you had the right stats you could talk the final boss to death… It was all there. It was a perfect storm of a really cool game with cool power armour and gibbing dudes with a machine gun. The way that they approached the world felt real and believable and something I hadn't seen before. I was just happy that I got to be a part of it when it was new, when it was state of the art."



ENTER AKUMA

THE *STREET Fighter* regular, Akuma, was revealed for the updated arcade version of this fighter titled *Tekken 7: Fated Retribution*, with a likely appearance on PS4, late last year. Officially in the game's fiction he is hired by Kazumi to stop her husband Heihachi should she fail in her own attempts. How the world warrior's presence in this universe ties together we couldn't begin to try and explain, but then again why would we want to? It's this kind of odd little addition and leap in logic that has made *Tekken* such a joy to become immersed in over the years. It will be interesting to see if any other alums from the Capcom series make the move over, perhaps in a Trojan horse effort to make *Tekken 7* into the ill-fated *Tekken X Street Fighter*.

■ Right: While the added power of the Unreal Engine 4 is giving *Tekken 7* more polish than ever, there are some interesting stylistic choices being made too. For instance, there's a bit of film grain effect on the game that gives it a Seventies martial arts movie vibe.



Tekken 7

CONCEPT ■ The King of Iron Fist Tournament returns as the great battle between grandfather, father and son is drawn to a close

A one-stop shop for fighting bears, cyborgs and melodrama

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PS4
Origin: Japan
Publisher: Bandai Namco
Developer: In-house
Release: TBC 2016 (Out now: Arcades)
Players: 1-2

Developer Profile

Katsuhiro Harada has been at the helm of the *Tekken* series from the very beginning and only appears to get crazier as the years pass. Much like his fighting series, Harada is known for his outlandish outbursts and sense of humour that pierce through a sometimes dark and moody shell.

Developer History

Tekken
1994 [PlayStation]

Tekken Tag Tournament
1999 [PS2, PS3]

Tekken Revolution
2013 [PS3]

Pokkén Tournament
2015 [Wii U]

High Point

The original *Tekken* is where this amazing journey began and while it followed *Virtua Fighter* as a 3D arcade battler, it has ultimately stood the test of time with precise controls and depth of combat over the years.

So this is how it ends; with women who can throw literal tiger uppercuts. You didn't think that the *Tekken* series would attempt to wrap up the Mishima clan saga with an earnest and heartfelt confrontation between Heihachi, Kazuya and Jin alone did you? No, Katsuhiro Harada was never going to let the premier 3D fighter in the world go out like that. Only the very best in logic-defying, fist-exploding and animal-anthropomorphising gameplay could possibly do for the triumphant and epic conclusion to this story, and you can even experience it with VR.

That's right, virtual reality. The King Of Iron Fist Tournament is not only returning to consoles in 2016, but also embracing the 3D world like never before by making itself compatible with PlayStation VR. Series creator and chief Harada has kept the exact details of how this will work close to his chest, however, the game's senior designer Michael Murray told *Wired* that it's more likely to be a means of appreciating the character design, rather than riffing on the first-person experience you got to try out in *Tekken 2*. We're envisioning something between the Autovista mode in the *Forza Motorsport* series and the idol videos of *Dead Or Alive 5* at the moment and rather hoping we're well off the scent. Expect to hear more about that soon.

But the game itself has plenty of key gameplay changes to help modernise it for this generation of systems, not least being built with Unreal Engine 4. It's interesting to note that it shares this base engine with *Street Fighter V*, a very different fighting game in terms of perspective, style and art direction, but all the same much of the flash and polish of Capcom's fighter is matched by Bandai Namco's effort. Epic has once again constructed an engine that looks likely to dominate the generation, albeit this time without homogenising the look of the games we're playing. *Tekken 7* retains the core spirit and animation style of the series with some added fluidity and setpiece spectacle.

/// This is most apparent through the new Rage Arts, which are pretty close to *Street Fighter*'s own Supers or the Critical Edges of *SoulCalibur V*. You gradually build up rage during the fight and can unleash it as a Rage Art at any time to deliver a series of unblockable attacks that will knock off around 30 per cent of your opponents health. Very Super-like, in other words, and much like in *Street Fighter* they can be added to combos. After use, the Rage meter is drained and you have to begin building it up again, but tactically it will feel very familiar to anyone who's been dabbling in the fighter world for the last generation.

It's the kind of attack that, as long as it connects, can turn a match or deal the finishing blow in style. Watching these Rage

> "An uncompromising fighting game experience that will deliver groundbreaking graphics, animation, and tournament style gameplay"
>
> ERIC HARTNESS BANDAI NAMCO

Arts added into the mix feels like there's a little added drama to encounters, reflecting some of the melodrama of the story itself. With some combo-extending elements of the series removed from this iteration, which we'll get into shortly, these new special attacks are a focal point of attention and a new tactical consideration as you enter a stage. Do you wait for a clear opening or attempt to surprise your opponent? Do you fight cautiously expecting the attack or make sure you're on the front foot quickly?

/// So, what has been lost? For a start, the bound state, which was a key element to extending combos, is no longer a part of the game. In its place we have Rage Arts, of course, but also the Power Crush that allows you to attack while still taking damage and the Screw Attack, an airborne hit that sends your opponent spinning and is not dissimilar from a bound state. It's a totally new dynamic however, and it will take some getting used to. Mixed with the varied styles of the fighters themselves, these new considerations should add a significant amount to the gameplay experience and has already seen some interesting bouts in *Tekken* competitions using the arcade version of the game.

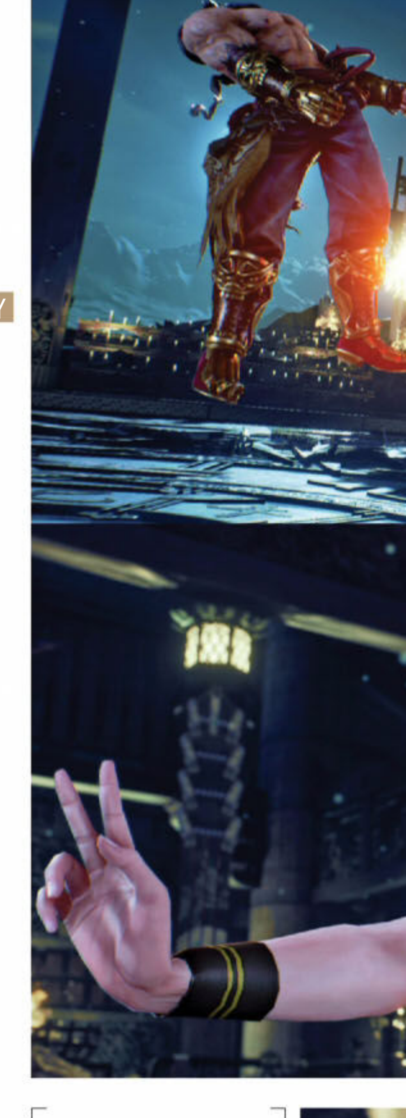
Tekken 7 has actually been available in arcades since March 2015, seeing a number of updates and roster extensions in the time since. Harada has used this public forum as a testing bed for gradually adding characters and making adjustments to gameplay before he launches a final product on consoles. As this is intended to close off the story of the Mishima clan there's definitely a sense of *Tekken 7* being a greatest hits of the series mixed with the most modern and expressive new flourishes the team can bring to bear.

A good example of this is the fantastic roster of classic and new characters, many of whom have seen designs by some of the great artists working in games today. For instance the Filipino fighter Josie Rizal, a response by Harada to fans in the Philippines asking for someone to represent them over the years, was conceived by Mari Shimazaki, Platinum's lead character designer and the woman behind *Bayonetta*. Additionally, *No More Heroes* artist Yūsuke Kozaki added the somewhat controversial Lucky Chloe and *Anarchy Reigns* designer Kenichiro Yoshimura was tasked with reinventing the immensely popular series-hopping master of the sword, Yoshimitsu.

CHARACTER CONTROVERSY

LUCKY CHLOE, the character designed by No More Heroes artist Yūsuke Kozaki caused a little bit of a storm when she was revealed for *Tekken 7* as part of a 20th anniversary celebration of the series. Some seemed to feel that the cat ear and headphones wearing fighter with her paw gloves was 'generic' or 'lacking originality'. That Harada chose to troll the naysayers by claiming she was exclusive to Eastern regions and would be replaced by a muscly skinhead for North America didn't help matters much at first. Josie Rizal also proved contentious thanks to claims that her name is too close to that of a national hero in the Philippines, although it's unclear how official this concern is from the nation's cultural commission.

> "Fighting game tournament players should be on notice as we're setting our sights on lighting up the tournament scene with the hardest hitting Tekken game ever"
>
> **ERIC HARTNESS** BANDAI NAMCO

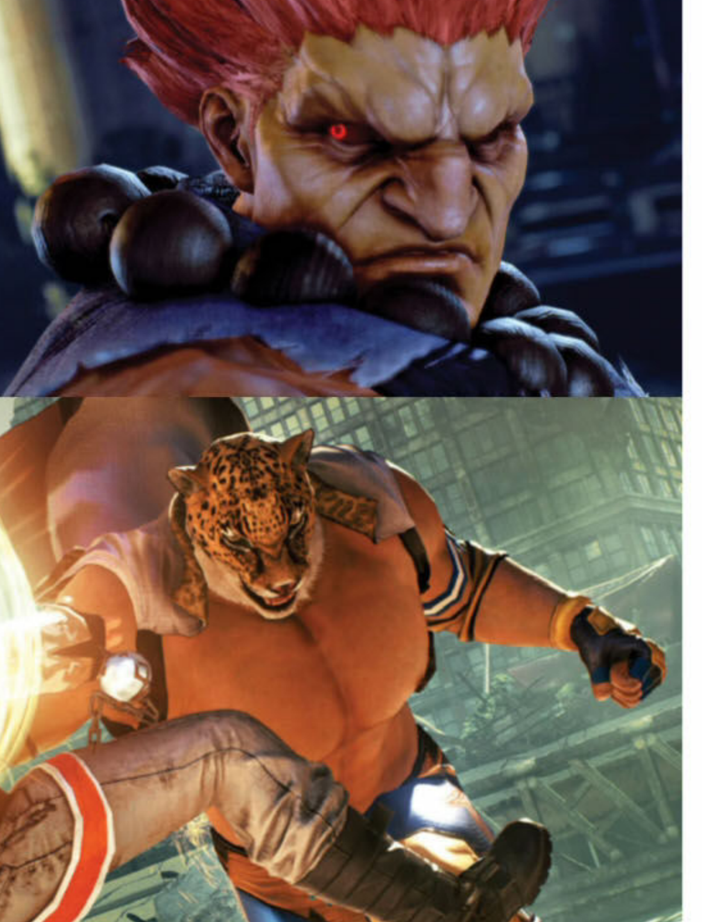




Above: Despite the penchant for the melodramatic and crazy, *Tekken* has always been a relatively approachable fighting game, relying on speedy reactions and common sense combo-building. Hopefully that will remain true here.



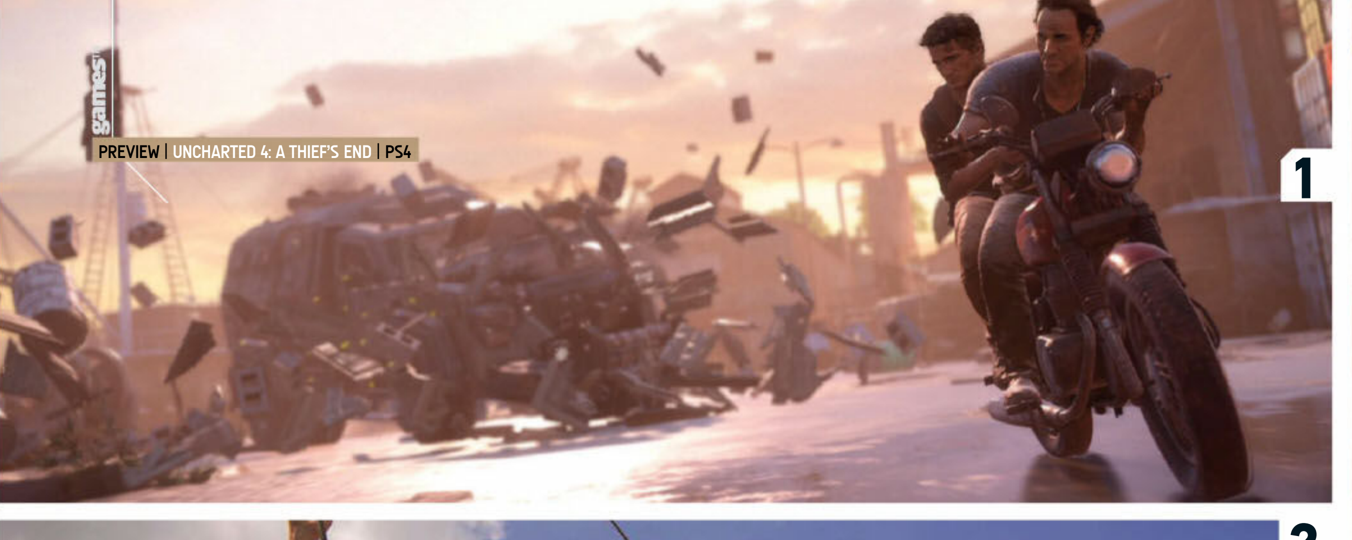
Above: The explosive effects of the *Tekken* series have not been diminished by time or the creeping influence of realism in the industry. Fists and feet explode on impact in a variety of great, completely illogical ways. Right: The addition of Akuma to the new arcade version of *Tekken 7* suggests there's still a lot of life left in the cabinet version of the game even if development has turned to consoles for the most part now. Below: Changes in how you can build and maintain combos will take some players who skipped *Tekken Revolution* a little time to get used to. This might prove to be a more demanding game, but hopefully more fulfilling too.

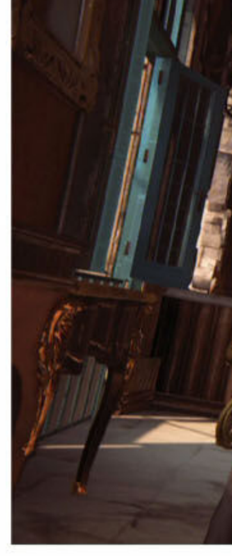


There are 28 playable characters in total although one of our favourites, Kuma the fighting bear, is not among them at present. Expect DLC to feature him pretty quickly, though. Instead we'll have to make do with Kazumi Mishima, the wife of Heihachi, mother of Kazuya and thrower of aforementioned tigers in other people's faces. Her tiger attack is one of the most ridiculous things we've seen from *Tekken 7*, but also one of the most glorious. She summons the beast as if from nowhere and it launches into clawing its adversary or rolling up and knocking them down. Kazumi also happens to be the final boss of the game, which is no great surprise given her abilities and relation to the primary characters of the series.

/// For all that's new about *Tekken 7*, though, and all the ways in which it is looking to modernise the series, it still harkens back to the best of this universe too. On the whole, Harada has compared *Tekken 7* to the darker narrative of *Tekken 4* for instance, so don't expect things to turn out great from the story of this game. It will be closing off the family drama of the *Tekken* series and revealing the origins of the Devil Gene that's been at the centre of much of the conflict so far. Similarly, the movement in the game has been favourably compared to *Tekken Revolution*, not least thanks to the lack of bounding, which is going to have a massive influence on how you learn to build and express yourself through combos if you haven't played a *Tekken* game in a little while. *Tekken Tag Tournament 2*'s stage effects and item moves also make an appearance, drawing in another popular and potentially game-changing mechanic for the main series. It's been noted that Asuka, King and Xiaoyu all retain the item moves they enjoyed from this previous game. Stage effects, on the other hand, add an interesting element of dynamic environment changes, moving from walled to infinite stages and generally altering the landscape in ways that can have a significant impact on gameplay depending on how you prefer to build your combos.

Tekken 7 is drawing on all of the strongest elements of this series to offer the most comprehensive and intensive version Harada can possibly muster. That said, the real fun of the game will be in competition and the adjustments that have been made so far are already proving popular on the competitive circuit as it battles it out on the arcade version of the game, acting as a beta test for the console experience. *Tekken 7* is as ludicrous and precise as it has ever been, mixing dark motifs, silly characters, precise controls and over-the-top action into a cocktail that could only have come from Harada. In a year that will see the launch of *Street Fighter V* on PS4 and PC, the addition of *Tekken 7* to 2015's fighters is most welcome indeed and having been fashioned in the furnace of arcades and sharpened by professional competition, we should all be expecting one of the best games in this franchise to date.





Uncharted 4: A Thief's End

CONCEPT Everybody's favourite archeologist, Nathan Drake, returns for his fourth and final epic adventure in this PS4 exclusive from Naughty Dog

Will it be worth the wait?

Yes, *Uncharted 4: A Thief's End* has been delayed. No, you aren't suffering from a mild case of hype-induced delirium, we mean it has been delayed *again*. Naughty Dog has pushed back the release of its highly anticipated PlayStation 4 exclusive for a second time in an effort to get Nathan Drake's blockbuster finale up to the highest of standards. For good reason, too; the award-winning studio finally has some stiff competition in the form of *Rise Of The Tomb Raider*. While Lara's latest might have stumbled in the execution of its writing and setpiece scenarios – areas Naughty Dog can confidently deliver on – Crystal Dynamics has certainly set a new benchmark for technical fidelity and mechanics in a sprawling action-filled adventure. But if there's any studio out there that can raise the bar, it's Naughty Dog. Consider the classic Shigeru Miyamoto quote, that "a delayed game is eventually good, but a rushed game is bad forever."

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PS4
Origin: USA
Publisher: Sony Computer Entertainment
Developer: Naughty Dog
Release: 29 April 2016
Players: 1

Developer Profile

Founded in 1989, Naughty Dog has been one of the most successful development studios in the world. From *Crash Bandicoot* – giving Sony a viable mascot to compete with Sega's Sonic and Nintendo's Mario – to finding further success with the likes of *Jak And Daxter*, *Uncharted* and *The Last Of Us*.

Developer History

Uncharted: Drake's Fortune
2007 [PS3]
Uncharted 2: Among Thieves
2009 [PS3]
Uncharted 3: Drake's Deception
2011 [PS3]

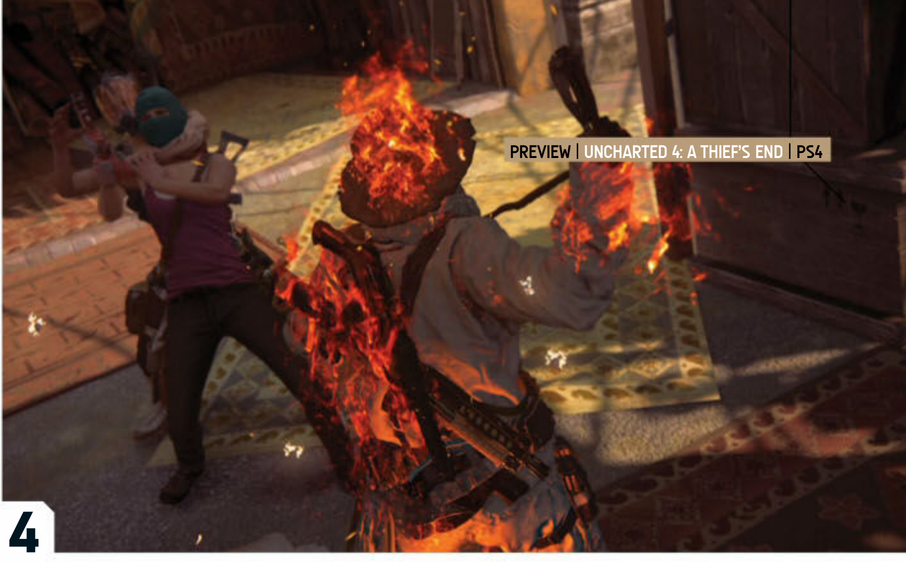
High Point

Naughty Dog has delivered too many high points to count, but who can forget scaling the train in the snowy Himalayas in the opening moments of *Uncharted 2: Among Thieves*?

1 WHAT WAS THE REASON FOR THE FIRST DELAY?

NAUGHTY DOG has been quite open throughout what appears to have been the relatively rocky development of *Uncharted 4: A Thief's End*, and the first delay was a result of the studio wanting to pump more resources into certain scenarios and cutscenes, in particular the ending. This will be the final game in the series to star Nathan Drake, and Naughty Dog isn't in the business of letting its fans down – well, as long as you take the ending to *Uncharted 3* with a pinch of salt. It's always refreshing to hear that a game has been delayed due to concerns over quality control; it's a strong reassurance that not only is the studio being open with its fans, but that it cares enough about the end product to make it as good as it can be.





5

> "We realised that several key sequences needed extra resources to bring them to the finish line"
>
> **NEIL DRUCKMANN** NAUGHTY DOG

2 AND WHAT ABOUT THE SECOND?

THE SECOND delay isn't because of bugs or the tepid response to the multiplayer beta, but a desire to push the game beyond expectations. "This is our largest *Uncharted* game to date, and the team has been working incredibly hard to meet the challenge of closing out the game's development in a timely manner," said directors Neil Druckmann and Bruce Straley in a joint statement. "However, as we approached our final deadlines and started wrapping up the game's levels, we realised that several key sequences needed extra resources to bring them to the finish line… we decided to extend our schedule, making sure that we get a few more polish passes before submitting our gold master."

3 WILL ANYTHING CHANGE AFTER THE MULTIPLAYER BETA?

Every owner of *Uncharted: The Nathan Drake Collection* found themselves staring down a weeks worth of early access to the multiplayer component of *A Thief's End* back in December. Naughty Dog is eager to bring some of the controlled chaos of the single-player adventure into the uncontrolled multiplayer arenas, and that comes in the form of AI-controlled sidekicks and supernatural power-ups called Mysticals. While feedback indicates that players began to warm to Mysticals as the beta progressed, multiplayer designer Robert Cogburn has admitted that feedback to the Sidekicks has been "mixed" and the feature will be addressed before launch.

4 WHAT SHOULD WE EXPECT FROM THIS FINAL OUTING?

So, *A Thief's End* has had its ups and downs during development. Major re-writes forced onto the project – following the departure of many key members of the studio, including lead writer Amy Hennig in 2014 – did create cause for concern, but it's looking fantastic. The single-player campaign is looking beautiful with a 1080p resolution, running at a solid 30fps, while the multiplayer has lost some fidelity (locked down at 900p) in favour of smooth 60fps action. If you've ever enjoyed Uncharted in its almost nine-year reign over the action-adventure market, it's one to watch. *Uncharted 4* is the system seller that the PS4 doesn't need, but it sure does deserve.

5 CAN I GO IN BLIND?

There was a very good reason Naughty Dog got *Uncharted: The Nathan Drake Collection* out of the door before 2015. No, it wasn't just about the money – come on, we're the only ones that are allowed to be cynical around here – it's because the studio wants players to be caught up before *A Thief's End* lands in April. Sure, you could go in blind and enjoy the quips, the improved shooting mechanics and insane moments of scripted platforming, but there's also a story with a lot of heart buried beneath *Uncharted*'s boisterous appearance. With a retired Nathan Drake returning to his old ways and his (long believed to be dead) older brother on the scene, this could well be Drake's best adventure yet.





Left: The fire effects are impressive, which inevitably means we'll be playing a level or two in the depths of hell, right?

Nioh

CONCEPT Taking place during the most intense period of civil unrest in Japanese history (the 'warring state' period), *Nioh* is *Dark Souls* via Bushido lore

The Soul(s) Of The Samurai

Japanese filmmaker Akira Kurosawa singlehandedly opened up the Western audience to Japanese cinema. Thanks to his 1950 film, *Rashomon*, Kurosawa earned critical and commercial success in the West; his continued depiction of samurai culture and the Edo period earned him international acclaim and his stories are still regarded as some of the best historical Japanese fiction around. Nioh is based directly on the works of Kurosawa, and we think that heritage is important to the game's philosophy: Team Ninja has been working silently on *Nioh* for some time (we've even referred to it as vapourware in the past), but it's here, and it's real, and it seems like a statement of intent: it's Team Ninja saying 'We're back'.

The developer has become known for its work on the *Dead Or Alive* projects of years gone by, as well as a few smaller collaborations – the *Toukiden* series and *Hyrule Warriors*, most recently. But the studio has a high pedigree; the *Ninja Gaiden* series was *Souls* before *Souls* was really a thing, laying the foundation for hardcore action games while Miyazaki and From Software toiled away on the esteemed – but flawed – *Armored Core* series. When From Software overtook Team Ninja in the hardcore action game arms race, it feels like Team Ninja gave up – releasing *Ninja Gaiden Yaiba* as an appalling mess and scampering back to *Dead Or Alive* and its Soft engine for comfort. But now, that could be set to change – the unchallenged rule of *Dark Souls* is being met with a distinctly different rival: one whose face is disguised with a kabuto, wielding a wakizashi.

Thanks to the Team Ninja's experience on *Ninja Gaiden*, it's different enough from *Souls* to stand out: you're trained in bushido arts, so you're fast, ostensibly lethal, but vulnerable. Your armour is made for mobility, not durability, so trivial encounters turn ugly fast if you don't dispatch your quarry with haste. There are bosses, too, that seem to take the form of imposing oni – each is characterised with a visual effect that seems to hark back to the game's filmic heritage (one oni emits an effect that looks like the negative from celluloid film). Whether or not this translates into gameplay or is just a visual quirk remains to be seen, but even so – we're intrigued by the premise.

Nioh was stuck in development hell for nearly a decade, but it's reemerged from obscurity a totally different beast: a game that uses the same mechanics as *Souls* (stamina, metroidvania level design, dodge rolls and parries), yet, somehow, is brimming with its own distinct personality. Maybe Team Ninja is keen to do what Kurosawa did with film all those years ago and do something amazing for historical Japanese fiction.

Even the camera angle of *Nioh* reminds us of *Souls* – at least the art direction is slightly more colourful?

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PS4
Origin: Japan
Publisher: Koei Tecmo
Developer: Team Ninja
Release: TBC 2016
Players: 1

Developer Profile

Despite developing hardcore action games like *Ninja Gaiden*, Team Ninja has kept itself afloat by developing the slightly less serious (and challenging) *Dead Or Alive* games for the past few years. With a good pedigree in the classic action game, though, *Nioh* looks like a return to form.

Developer History

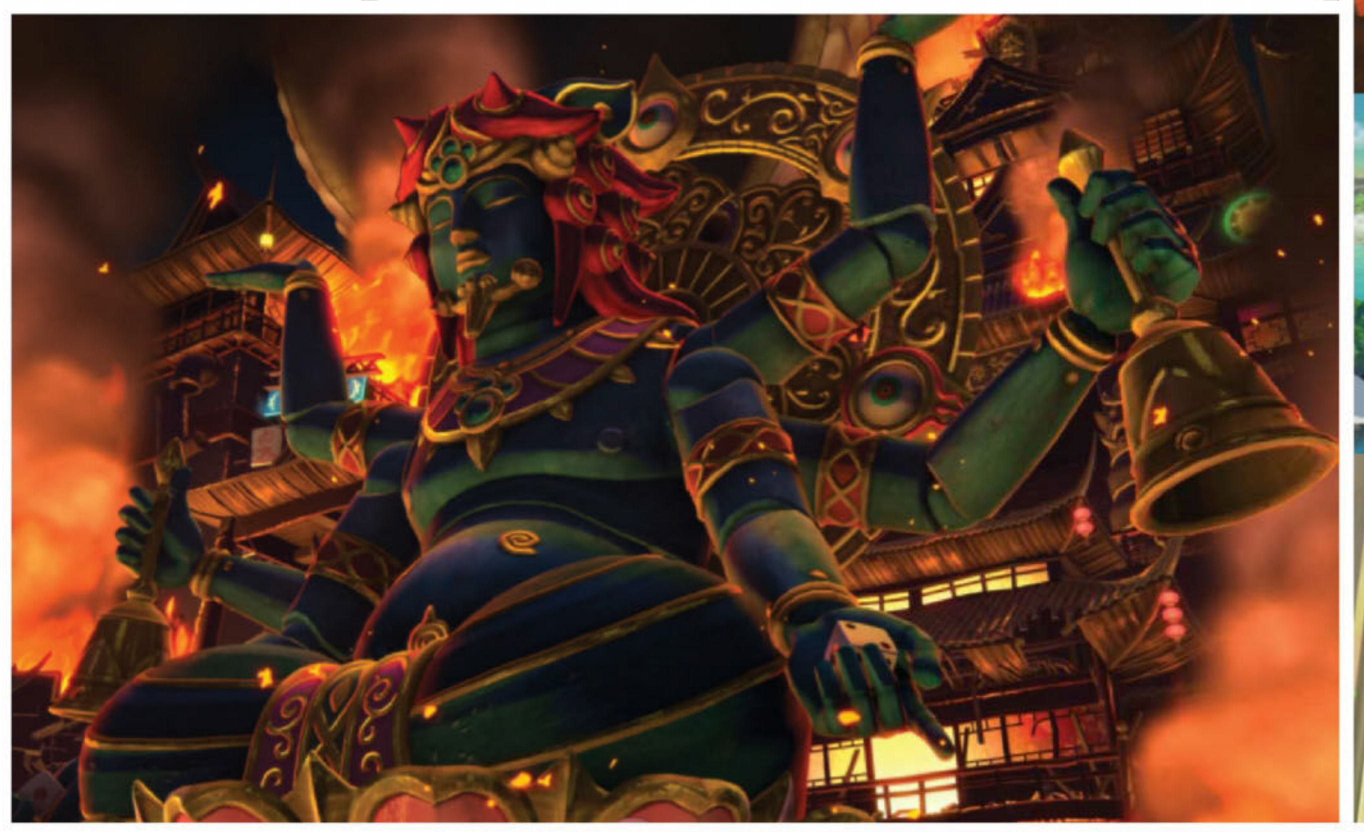
Dead Or Alive
Arcade/Sega Saturn/PlayStation [1996]
Ninja Gaiden
Xbox [2004]
Metroid: Other M
Wii [2010]
Toukiden: Age Of Demons
Vita [2013]

High Point

Ninja Gaiden 2 was a gothic romp through a faux-European world, stylized with Japanese elements. With enemies ranging from weird lizards to lycanthropic nightmares, it was a truly sadistic experience.



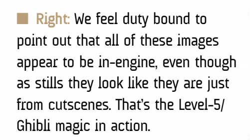
■ Right: *Ni No Kuni II* is embracing a brand new band of heroes who are seeking to put the Boy King, Evan, back on the throne of Ding Dong Dell where he belongs. ■ Below: The last game was a real looker, but we have to say that *Ni No Kuni II* is looking even more impressive, with animation quality landscapes and backgrounds coming to life in 3D like never before. Level-5 is doing an amazing job translating this visual style into games.



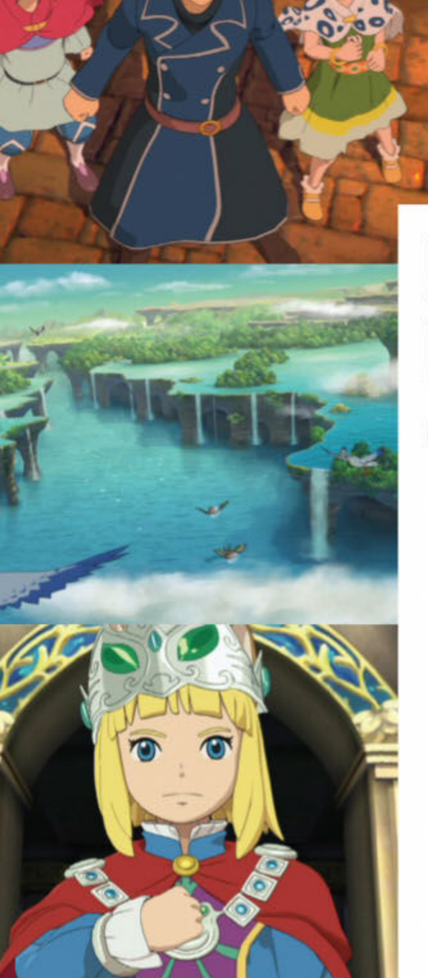
PAINTING A PICTURE

ONE OF THE first things that we noticed seeing the first reveal of *Ni No Kuni II* was how much more like the classic painted landscapes of the Ghibli movies this world seemed to be achieving. The 3DS and PS3 game was no slouch in the looks department, but this sequel appears to carry even more of the clean lines around characters and the beautiful brush strokes around the world that we associate with the Japanese animation studio. The trailer for the game has already revealed that large birds will carry our heroes around the world and that could mean all sorts of far-flung lands and locations will open up to us for the first time in this universe. Having doubled down on this art style and really nailed the fluidity of the animation, we can't even begin to imagine what it will finally look like.





■ Right: We feel duty bound to point out that all of these images appear to be in-engine, even though as stills they look like they are just from cutscenes. That's the Level-5/ Ghibli magic in action.





Ni No Kuni II: Revenant Kingdom

CONCEPT ■ We're going back to the Other World with a brand new set of characters, a new quest, but with the same amazing anime style

Giving us that Ghibli feeling

The line of succession for the throne of Ding Dong Dell is deeply confusing. We're pretty sure that in *Ni No Kuni: Wrath Of The White Witch* the king was a large cat named Tom, but in *Ni No Kuni II* we now appear to have a human child named Evan on the throne. Even more confusingly, he appears to be overthrown by a rat. Whatever is this kingdom coming to?

Such is our reintroduction to the Other World, the setting for *Ni No Kuni II* and our return to the small kingdom that was an opening to the original game on DS and PS3. We have been introduced to the new boy king, witnessed the usurper to his thrown and met Roland, a new traveller from another world who doesn't belong in this magical reality. Essentially we have a hard reset on the *Ni No Kuni* universe and a new tale to tell. Whether *Revenant Kingdom* is before or after the events of *Wrath Of The White Witc*h, whether we'll get to meet some of our favourite characters again or indeed if there's any relation between the two games other than name or setting we really don't know, but the world is a very familiar one.

While Studio Ghibli itself does not appear to be directly involved in production of this sequel, its influence is written all over every face and every creature design. The tone of the game as revealed so far still screams classic Ghibli with all the innocence and heartfelt earnestness we would hope to see from the animation giant. Level-5 is sensibly honouring the building blocks put in place by the original game both graphically and narratively. Expect lots of childlike ponderings, emotional scenes and memorable moments of philosophical discovery.

While the Japanese animation house isn't directly involved in production this time having played its part already, Ghibli veteran Yoshiyuki Momose returns as the character designer for the game along with composer Joe Hisaishi who also scored the first title and many Ghibli feature films. Just as importantly though is that Level-5's own internal team has some continuity on the project as Akihiro Hino, president and CEO of the company, returns to *Ni No Kuni* as writer and general game director. He was previously responsible for the story for the game on both DS and PS3 as well as acting as producer.

Hino's place on this game is all the more impressive given that he has also been behind one of the biggest breakout hits in Japanese game development over the last few years, *Yo-Kai Watch*. As creative producer, planner and story writer, Hino has been an important figure in the rise of this RPG hit for 3DS as it managed to outsell rival *Pokémon* and *Monster Hunter* titles back in 2013 and looks to have a similar impact on Western markets this coming year. After the equally impressive fanbase built up around *Professor Layton* titles on handheld devices, it's a wonder that Level-5 hasn't been able to really make a massive splash on consoles, but with a pedigree as strong as its had since the release of *Dark Cloud* in 2000, we would think it would only be a matter of time. As it stands, the crossover appeal of *Ni No Kuni* between anime and RPG fanatics (a strong Venn diagram, we believe) means that this should do rather nicely so long as it delivers as polished and enticing an experience as last time.

> "The artistic visionaries behind the first game are back to take their creative vision of a grand adventure to even higher heights"
>
> ERIC HARTNESS, BANDAI NAMCO

Concentrating on a single platform with PlayStation 4 exclusivity should assist production greatly, allowing for the utmost degree of polish. We're looking forward to seeing what can be achieved with the classic Ghibli style writ large with the full power of Sony's console behind it. This series looked great on handheld and PS3 previously, but on PS4 we should be in for a special treat.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PS4
Origin: Japan
Publisher: Bandai Namco
Developer: Leve-5
Release: TBC 2016
Players: 1

Developer Profile

Level-5 made a name for itself quickly in the early 2000s with anime style puzzlers and RPGs that hit fast. Games like the *Professor Layton* series and *Inazuma Eleven* games on the DS have helped support more ambitious work on home consoles like *White Knight Chronicles* and the original *Ni No Kuni* games on DS and PS3.

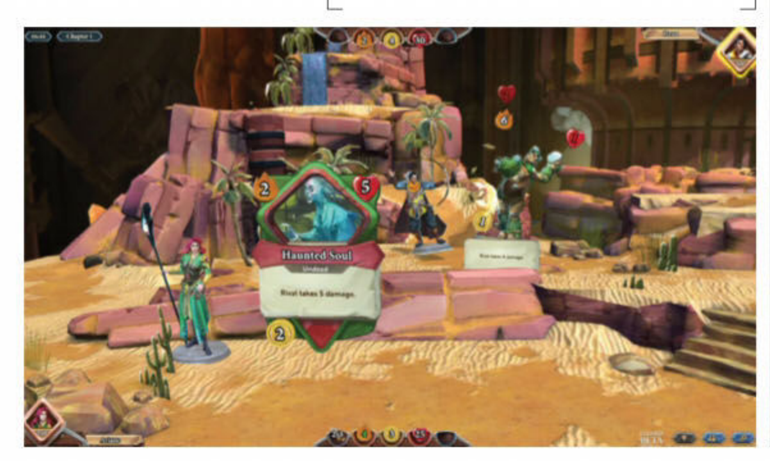
Developer History

Dark Cloud **2000 [PS2]**
Professor Layton And The Curious Village **2007 [DS]**
White Knight Chronicles **2008 [PS3]**
Yo-Kai Watch **2013 [3DS]**

High Point

Yo-Kai Watch, which is now finally seeing a Western release, has been a massive hit for Level-5, spawning a sequel and spin-offs already on the 3DS. Everyone is watching to see if it breaks big outside of Japan.

Below: The *Hearthstone* comparisons are unavoidable from an aesthetic point of view, but trust us, in play *Chronicle* really does stand on its own two feet





Chronicle: Runescape Legends

CONCEPT Cherry-picking the best bits of lore from the expansive *Hearthstone* mythos, *Chronicle* is a card game with a twist

Play your cards right

Remember the old saying about how in cities you're 'never more than six feet away from a rat?' We're pretty sure the same thing is now true of *Hearthstone*, with the amount of devices it's now installed on – that game is everywhere. But so was Gwent for a while, when *The Witcher III* released. You'd be surprised at how many people you most likely know that play the online *Pokémon* card app, too, *and* the various console iterations of *Magic: The Gathering*.

CCGs (that's collectible card games for the uninitiated) are everywhere, that's undeniable. *Hearthstone* made them cool again, but they never went away – they've always been a deep part of alternative culture, always with rich communities and hardcore fanbases. That's why we were totally unsurprised when Jagex announced *Chronicle: RuneScape Legends*.

It's a universe that lends itself quite well to this fledgling virtual genre to be honest – granted, the CCG offers a totally different visual aesthetic to the parent franchise, but bits of the lore, bits of the universe, are all embedded in there. It's no secret that *RuneScape* made its name with most players a decade ago, so if you're jumping back into the world, you'll be surprised by how much of it remains familiar. Don't worry if you're a newcomer to this aging realm, though; everything *RuneScape* related is just dressing for the unique gameplay that lies just beneath that high-fantasy surface.

> "Write your story, grow your character and win in battle"
> PR RELEASE JAGEX

The art direction is really well-achieved: unlike *M:TG*, or *Hearthstone*, or the *Pokémon* TCG, each game of *Chronicle* plays out like a story; each turn is referred to as a chapter and the 'board' slowly takes the form of a landscape, emerging from a book as play goes on. The whole thing seems like a loving nod towards tabletop gaming and gaming with miniatures – something that works incredibly well in VR, too.

At the opening of each game, you're presented with a series of Legends to pick (think of this as 'character selection'). There are currently only four on offer – The Raptor, Linza, Ariane and Ozan – but Jagex intends to add more. Like *Hearthstone*, the way each game unfolds depends on the hero you pick – each has its own costs and perk set that can determine how each unique story plays out.

The most unique thing about *Chronicle* is the way card draws and powers work: rather than trying to get one over on your opponent at every turn, every card you play affects *you*, it affects *your* hero… This means you're essentially developing a quest for your hero to go on, rather than developing a hero to go on a quest. It's a brave and interesting move, and one that certainly breaks the mold of the virtual CCG genre that, really, is only in the early stages of its life right now.



Above: Jagex is making sure that *Chronicle* is VR-ready, and the diorama-inspired art direction really plays to the strengths of a VR viewpoint and interactive experience.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC
Origin: UK
Publisher: Jagex
Developer: In-house
Release: TBC 2016
Players: 1-2

Developer Profile

Jagex made its name (and its substantial bank of profit) with *RuneScape*, and has used the revenue from the game to tackle more diverse and interesting projects as the company has matured. Still independent, and still successful, Jagex and *RuneScape* celebrate their 15 year anniversary this year.

Developer History

RuneScape **2001 [PC]**
Ace Of Spades **2012 [PC]**
Transformers Universe [beta] **2014 [PC]**

High Point

RuneScape has been around for over a decade – no mean feat for a game that came from a small British studio. It continues to attract new players whilst retaining a healthy amount of long-time fans: Jagex must be doing something right.

Star Citizen

CONCEPT ■ Crowd-funded and crowd pleasing, this is the spiritual successor to *Wing Commander* with full space exploration, FPS combat and plenty more besides.

Now for the $100 million question

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC
Origin: USA
Publisher: Cloud Imperium
Developer: In-house
Release: TBC 2016
Players: Massively Multiplayer

Developer Profile

Chris Roberts is heading up development of *Star Citizen* from the US over several continents and time zones, but he started out making BBC Micro games in Manchester. His break out game came after he returned to the US with *Wing Commander*, followed by *Privateer*, *Starlancer* and more.

Developer History

Wing Commander **1990 [Multi]**
Strike Commander **1993 [PC]**
Wing Commander: Privateer **1993 [PC]**
Starlancer **2000 [PC, Dreamcast]**

High Point

Wing Commander remains the touchstone for pretty much everything Chris Roberts has done since its release. Even when Roberts took a break from the games industry for a while, it was a *Wing Commander* movie he went to make first.

A turn of phrase that probably bounces around a lot at Cloud Imperium Games these days is 'haters gonna hate'. For all the fan fervour and interest in space exploration game *Star Citizen*, there appears to be as much scepticism and, from some quarters, outright accusations of subterfuge going on. What is it about this massive space travel and combat MMO that could be driving people mad on either side of this equation?

Well, money plays a big part in it. *Star Citizen* has now crowdfunded its way to a $100 million war chest for development and it's still picking up more support. And with some investors putting as much as $30,000 into the project there is a concern that people are being asked for too much to get this game made. So much in fact that they could never get a final experience worth the amount of money they've invested. Since no-one was twisting their arm to donate, we're inclined to argue that this was their choice and it will be up to them to decide whether the investment was wise when the final game launches. In the meantime, the *Star Citizen* alpha 2.0 has shown off some excellent progress for the game, binding what had previously been individual modules into a cohesive whole.

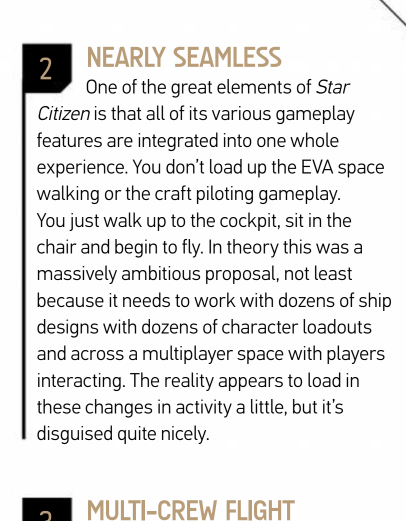
1 EXPLORE, FLY AND SHOOT

As well as proving that the promise of seamless gameplay is a reality, the latest alpha test for *Star Citizen* has also given us a closer look at the various ways you can interact in this game too. Starting at Port Olisar situated in an Armistice Zone so that all weapons are automatically locked down, you get the chance to wander around and meet other players or just explore your surroundings in first- or third-person. Outside there's the gas giant Crusader to gaze upon and its three moons, Yela, Cellin and Daymar to explore, each offering a different form of gameplay to try out.

"It's all technology that has never been undertaken to this scale and depth before in our industry"
CHRIS ROBERTS, CLOUD IMPERIUM GAMES







2 NEARLY SEAMLESS

One of the great elements of *Star Citizen* is that all of its various gameplay features are integrated into one whole experience. You don't load up the EVA space walking or the craft piloting gameplay. You just walk up to the cockpit, sit in the chair and begin to fly. In theory this was a massively ambitious proposal, not least because it needs to work with dozens of ship designs with dozens of character loadouts and across a multiplayer space with players interacting. The reality appears to load in these changes in activity a little, but it's disguised quite nicely.

3 MULTI-CREW FLIGHT

Until recently the only forms of craft that could be tested in the game were single-seater vessels or ships with one player on board. The latest alpha has opened up multi-crew vessels for the first time, named the Constellation and Retaliator. These ships need several players to pilot and while one player may be at the helm, others can control gun turrets or just walk about the place, investigating things on board. It's the co-operative way to play that really lives up to the *Star Trek* fantasy many will be looking for from this release.

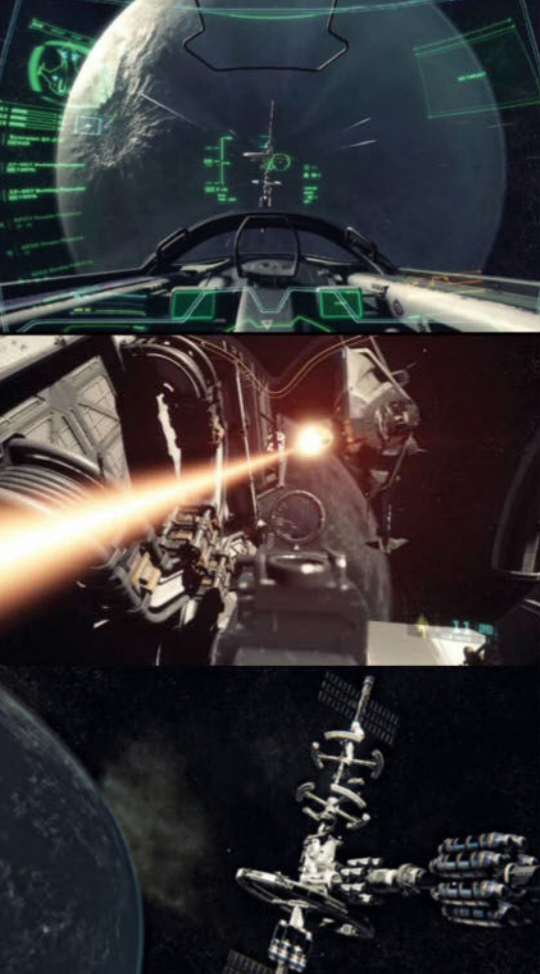
4 FLIGHT CONTROL

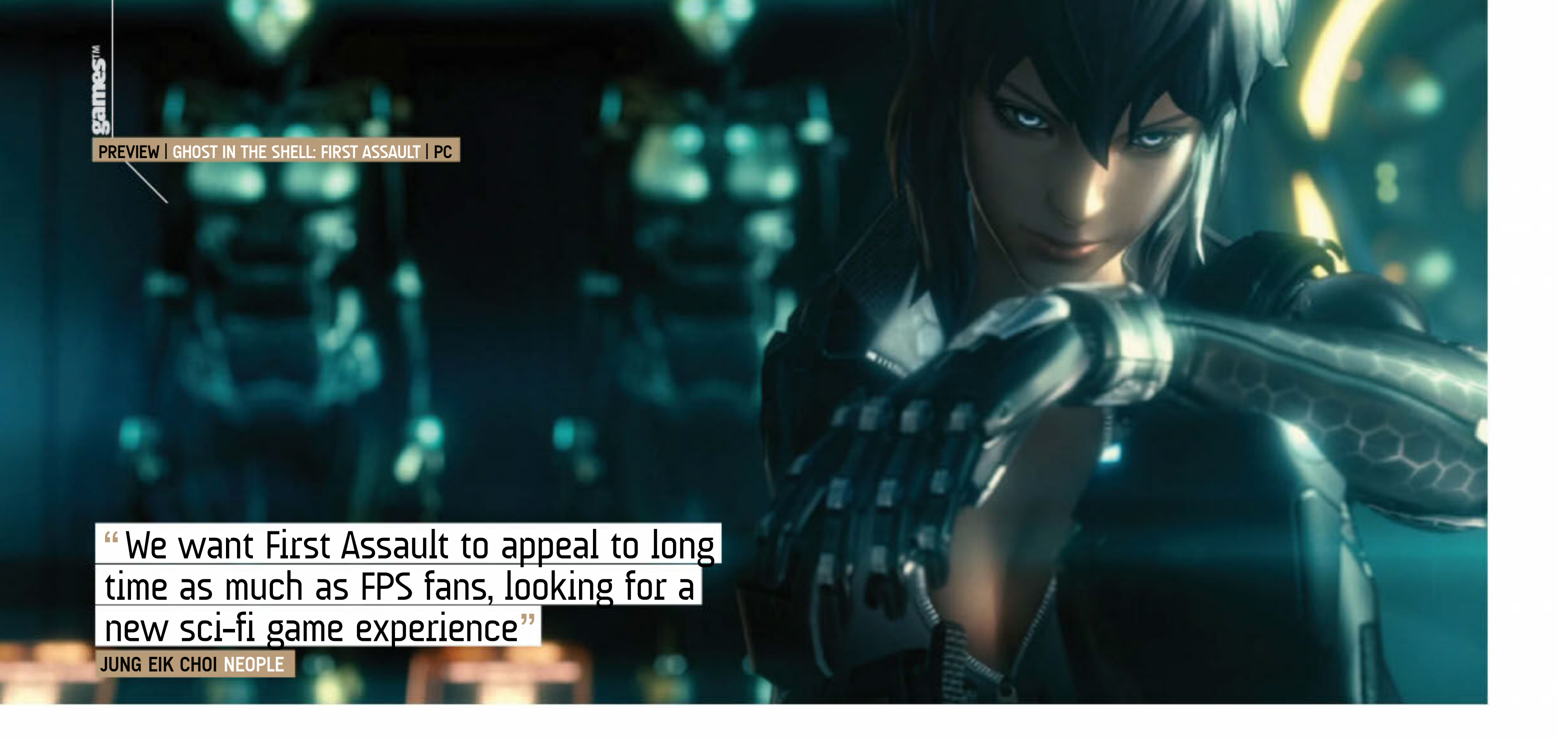
Perhaps a less jazzy addition to the game has been new flight control schemes that better reflect the range of gameplay styles and objectives on offer. Up until now, combat manoeuvring has been the default flight mode for dogfighting modules of the game. Precision mode has now been added for slower, but more controlled flight and for aiding in things like docking or landing on a space-station platform. Cruise mode has also been introduced, allowing for faster travel with less control, setting you on a clear course across the gigantic emptiness of space to get to your chosen objective.

5 A STAR-STUDDED CAST

As well as the immense, CryEngine-powered game world that Cloud Imperium is making, the money raised so far has also allowed for an impressive cast to be added to the game. The most notable addition is Mark Hamill, who is not only better known as Luke Skywalker, but was also the lead in Chris Robert's original space exploration epic, *Wing Commander*. He'll be playing Lt Commander Steve 'Old Man' Colton alongside Gary Oldman, Andy Serkis, Gillian Anderson, and John Rhys-Davies. As impressive as the cast is the excellent recreation of each actor in-game, rendered in stunning detail and fully motion captured for cutscenes.







"We want First Assault to appeal to long time as much as FPS fans, looking for a new sci-fi game experience"
JUNG EIK CHOI NEOPLE

Ghost In The Shell: First Assault

CONCEPT ■ A free-to-play online shooter based on the popular Japanese manga series, *First Assault* will feature highly customisable characters and both PvE and PvP modes

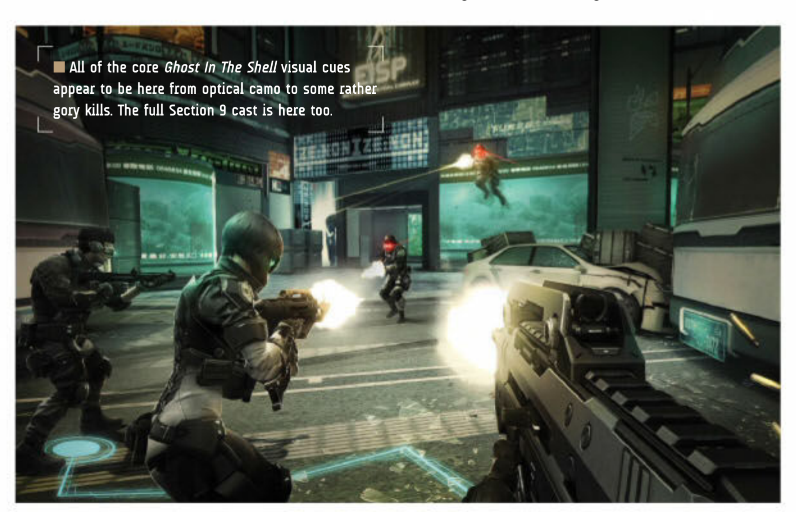
Domo arigato, Mr Roboto

It looks and sounds a little cheaper, but playing *Ghost In The Shell: First Assault*, you begin to wonder why anyone these days would shell out good money for *Call Of Duty*, or *Battlefield*. Maybe too much time has passed. Maybe multiplayer shooters haven't changed enough since 2007, and the first *Modern Warfare*. But *Ghost In The Shell*, which will be free-to-play when it launches later in 2016, is every bit as competent as its premium console equivalents. You shoot people, they die and you're awarded points and customisations. On the one hand, it's remarkable that a game so full and technically smooth goes to market these days as FTP. On the other, *Ghost In The Shell* feels like a reminder of how drab the online shooter has become, and how little developers are doing - or have done - to shake up the formula.

A couple of things stand out about *Ghost In The Shell*. First, it boasts huge character customisation – using dozens of upgrades and perks, you can create more than 5000 different loadout combinations, meaning matches still feel occasionally fresh even when you're going through the same rote game modes. Second, the SkillSync function. Not every character class has access to this, unfortunately, but it allows you to swap and merge abilities with your comrades on the fly.

Say you're playing as a sneaky sniper type and you run up alongside one of your teammates, who's playing a heavy gunner. Using SkillSync you can instantly lend her your ability to go invisible, or she can give you the skill to create automated turrets. Where online shooters often feel isolated and less like a team game than a bunch of individuals, using their own tools to score their own points, *Ghost In The Shell* is trying to create a communal experience. It's all done automatically and instantly - SkillSync simply activates once you're in proximity to other players – and it makes for a greater sense of team effort.

But the abilities you share, like *Ghost In The Shell*'s plant the bomb and deathmatch game modes, feel familiar and unenthusiastic. Take more damage, vanish from the mini-map, launch a recon drone – it's the usual FPS hoopla. So far, *Ghost In The Shell* seems solid and functional (if you've played Zombie Studios' *Blacklight Retribution*, it feels very similar) but there's nothing, so far at least, to blow off your socks. Fans of the eponymous manga series are likely to be excited - aesthetically, *Ghost In The Shell* is faithful to its source material… but whether this can captivate an outside audience remains to be seen.



■ All of the core *Ghost In The Shell* visual cues appear to be here from optical camo to some rather gory kills. The full Section 9 cast is here too.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC
Origin: Japan
Publisher: Nexon
Developer: Neople
Release: TBC 2016
Players: 1-16

Developer Profile

Founded in Seoul, South Korea in 1994, Nexon is largely known for its publishing of online and free-to-play games. It is headquartered in Japan and also has offices in the US. In 2013, Nexon opened a museum on South Korea's Jeju Island dedicated entirely to videogame history.

Developer History

Combat Arms **2009 [PC]**
Dragon Nest **2013 [PC]**
Atlantica Online **2014 [PC]**

High Point

Though it's scored big with various FTP titles, Nexon's high point will likely arrive later in 2016, when it publishes *LawBreakers*, the latest game from *Gears Of War* creator Cliff Bleszinski.



Even though the art style is drawing its fair share of comparisons to *Battleborn*, the games are vastly different. *Overwatch* feels more like the spiritual successor to *TimeSplitters* than it does a MOBA-FPS hybrid.



THE SHIFTING RELEASE WINDOW

AS IT STANDS, *Overwatch* is going to launch "on or before 21 June 2016." But as any Blizzard fan is no doubt aware of by now, the studio has no problem pushing back release dates with little warning if it figures a product needs more time. *Overwatch* has already been subject to numerous beta tests, and Blizzard has already made it clear that it's in no rush to release ranked play for *Overwatch* until it sees how a larger community adopts the core experience first. Are we confident *Overwatch* will launch 21 June? Sure, though we were also confident *StarCraft: Ghost* would launch in 2003 and we're still waiting.

Above: All of the heroes and maps released in the future for *Overwatch* will be given away for free, Blizzard has announced, which should be great for keeping the community together as the months pass by after launch. Right: While MMO *Titan* was almost entirely scrapped, many of the basic map designs have been revived for *Overwatch*. It's certainly a glimpse of what could have been.





Overwatch

CONCEPT ■ *Overwatch* is a fast-paced FPS that swings the emphasis away from big body counts and onto team-work, camaraderie and an array of unique heroes to fight with

The devil is in the details

Honestly, it's almost shocking that *Overwatch* is progressing so successfully through beta, let alone able to confidently lock down a release window. The fast and frenetic shooter emerged from the ashes of Blizzard's failed MMO experiment, *Titan*, and is intended to "create an awesome FPS experience that's more accessible to a much wider audience while delivering the action and depth that shooter fans love." At least, that's how Blizzard co-founder Mike Morhaime sees it – and we hasten to agree. games™ has had a handful of opportunities to sample *Overwatch* across alpha and beta since it was first revealed back in 2014, and we've been constantly surprised with the progress as Blizzard looks to release its first new IP in 17 years.

/// So why the shock and awe at its progress? Because development has been riddled with what game director Jeff Kaplan describes as "minor disasters". Of course, he says these things with a knowing smile; you can always count on Blizzard to create a game made entirely in service of the player. That's already been demonstrated with the confirmation that *Overwatch* will: a) not be free-to-play b) indeed be coming to console c) not be released before it is ready and d) will deliver all future downloadable heroes and maps for free. Good news for all of us.

This is the result of Blizzard listening intently to its rabid fan base and making necessary – and in some cases, sweeping – changes to the core gameplay mechanics and systems. Truthfully, when Kaplan laughs off the "minor disasters" his team has encountered through development, he's referring to the progression systems, or the lack thereof, in the last playable build.

While early-access players are already desperately questioning the longevity of *Overwatch* – because a game simply being just 'fun' doesn't seem to cut it anymore, as *Star Wars: Battlefront* so successfully demonstrated late into 2015 – Blizzard has been hard at work figuring out how it can implement a progression system into the game. And, more importantly, how it can squirrel one in without it both breaking the intended gameplay loop and unbalancing the game for casual and competitive players alike.

"What we want to do is introduce a new progression system that doesn't overly reward people for hanging on one hero," says Kaplan, who promises the system will debut in the next beta build for players to sample. "Sometimes it's okay to reward that behaviour; we know there's a lot of you that have a main and really enjoy playing that one character – and we don't want you to feel bad or wrong about doing that either – but we also don't want to overly reward that type of thing with a progression or reward system." It's a difficult balancing act to get right.

"We don't want to focus players on progression as the end all, be all," continues Kaplan. "We would like the progression to be light, cosmetic and, almost, a way of the game thanking you for investing your time into it. Like it's saying 'Hey, we know you've invested some time in *Overwatch*, so we wanted to give you these light rewards that don't overly skew the game in one way or another'.

> "Your motivation for playing Overwatch should be that it's a fun, competitive multiplayer shooter"
>
> JEFF KAPLAN BLIZZARD

/// That's easier said than done, of course. Blizzard has already built, included and cut two progression and reward systems from *Overwatch* in the last 12 months. One wasn't overly dissimilar from the system found in Gearbox's competitor *Battleborn*, where players could earn EXP in-game to unlock abilities on a *World Of Warcraft* style branching talent tree, though it was deemed not only too confusing for players trying to tactically hero pick during crucial map moments but it also diluted the essence of *Overwatch*'s jump-in-and-enjoy ethos.

The second system saw players rewarded with cosmetic items for levelling up specific heroes, though this pushed players to stop experimenting with heroes and tactically switching between the four classes in-game in aid of further pushing single hero progression to level 20 for maximum bragging rights. Neither fit *Overwatch*, and now we're left to see whether Blizzard can strike the right balance. "Your motivation for playing *Overwatch* should be that it's a fun, competitive multiplayer shooter," says Kaplan. "Not that you're trying to get more powerful or acquire a bunch of items." Whether that's enough to give *Overwatch* the kind of longevity that *Warcraft*, *Diablo* and *Starcraft* have enjoyed is impossible to say, but Blizzard is in this for the long haul, and we can't wait to see what happens next.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC, Xbox One, PS4
Origin: USA
Publisher: Blizzard Entertainment
Developer: In-house
Release: 21 June 2016
Players: 1-12

Developer Profile

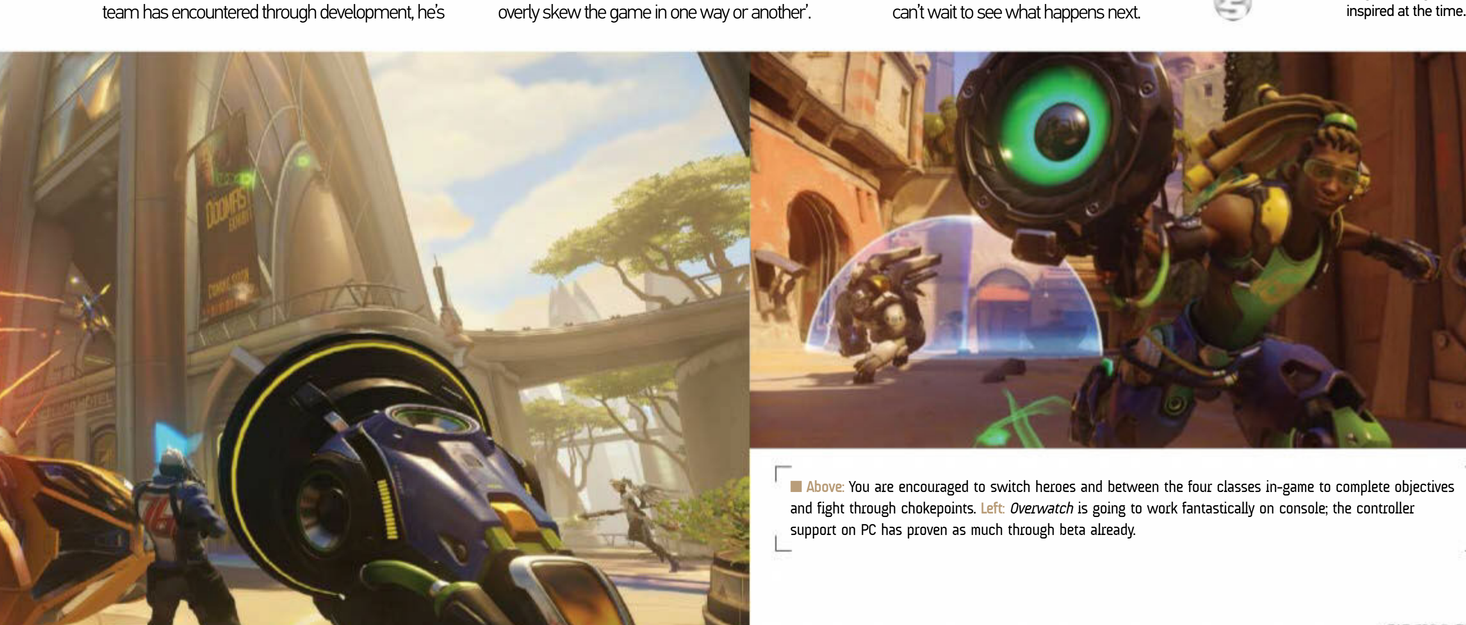
Jeff Kaplan joined Blizzard in 2002 before stepping up as a game director for the launch of *World Of Warcraft*. He would later oversee two expansions. In 2009 he began work on the cancelled MMO *Titan*, before transforming it into *Overwatch*.

Developer History

World Of Warcraft **2004 [PC]**
World Of Warcraft: The Burning Crusade **2007 [PC]**
World Of Warcraft: Wrath Of The Lich King **2008 [PC]**

High Point

Nobody could have predicted *World Of Warcraft* would be such a wild and enduring success – Kaplan's early world, quest and dungeon design was inspired at the time.



■ Above: You are encouraged to switch heroes and between the four classes in-game to complete objectives and fight through chokepoints. Left: *Overwatch* is going to work fantastically on console; the controller support on PC has proven as much through beta already.



"You can create a shooter, or a racer, or a platformer or even a genre that doesn't even exist yet"
MARK HEALEY MEDIA MOLECULE



Huts and houses aren't just quaint outside decoration – they're potentially doorways to new worlds and experiences.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PS4
Origin: England
Publisher: Sony
Developer: Media Molecule
Release: TBC 2016

Developer Profile

Formed in 2006, the Guildford-based Media Molecule prides itself on creating games all about creativity and captured imaginations. The *LittleBigPlanet* series became a pillar of Sony's PlayStation exclusivity, while *Tearaway* and *Tearaway Unfolded* took papercraft and gently shaped it into one of the most memorable and charming games ever.

Developer History

LittleBigPlanet **2008 [PS3]**
LittleBigPlanet 2 **2011 [PS3]**
Tearaway **2013 [PSV]**

High Point

While *Tearaway*'s majestic papercraft meanderings comes close, the sheer level of creativity offered in the original *LittleBigPlanet* makes it one PlayStation exclusive even Nintendo couldn't match.

Dreams

CONCEPT Media Molecule's new surreal, player-creative offering hopes to turn dreams into delights

Miles to go and promises to keep

Ever since it was announced back in 2013, *Dreams* remains one of PS4's most intriguing offerings. It's also one of its most obtuse, thanks to the overwhelmingly deep nature of its creative canvas. Thankfully, Media Molecule has finally gone into a little more depth of what its latest project actually is and just how imaginative you can be. *Dreams*, unsurprisingly, is all about dreams. More specifically, building your very own somnambulation scenario like you would an entire level in *LittleBigPlanet*. Being able to build any setting or genre is quite the daunting prospect, so in order to make things a little less scary MM has created your new best creative companion: the Imp. Like a cross between a cutesy mascot and a cursor, the Imp is your way of adding elements to a dream like a sentient paintbrush. You can customise your companion, too - simply drag your finger across DualShock 4's touchpad to give them a suitable expression for the day's dream conjuration.

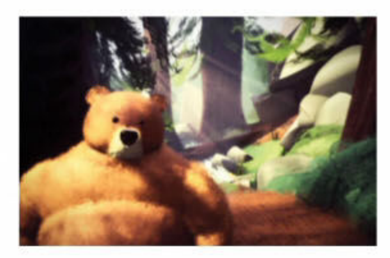
You can possess characters in each dream by simply selecting them with your Imp - you can then move said chum around the level with both the left analog stick and DS4's gyroscope. Collectable items such as trees and huts can also be found and used to expand your dream even further. Huts, houses and buildings offer another intriguing layer to *Dreams*' broad vision – something the studio currently calls 'links'. The idea is anything with a door or window could potentially lead to another dreamscape. These portals are, like everything else in *Dreams*, totally customisable and can even be set to send fellow dreamers into random worlds across the game's interconnected web. It's one of the most fascinating elements the game has to offer and will be perfect for those more interested in exploring than creating.

Much like *LittleBigPlanet*, which offered a daunting level of customisation on its own back in 2008, *Dreams*' creation suite is built for casual players and advanced curators alike. It's all about creating elements (platforms, doors, mechanisms, etc) to help you build a unique adventure that's as simple or challenging as you like. You can create these from scratch or search for items designed by other players. And again, much like *LittleBigPlanet*, Media Molecule is confident *Dreams* will foster the same kind of warm, cooperative community.

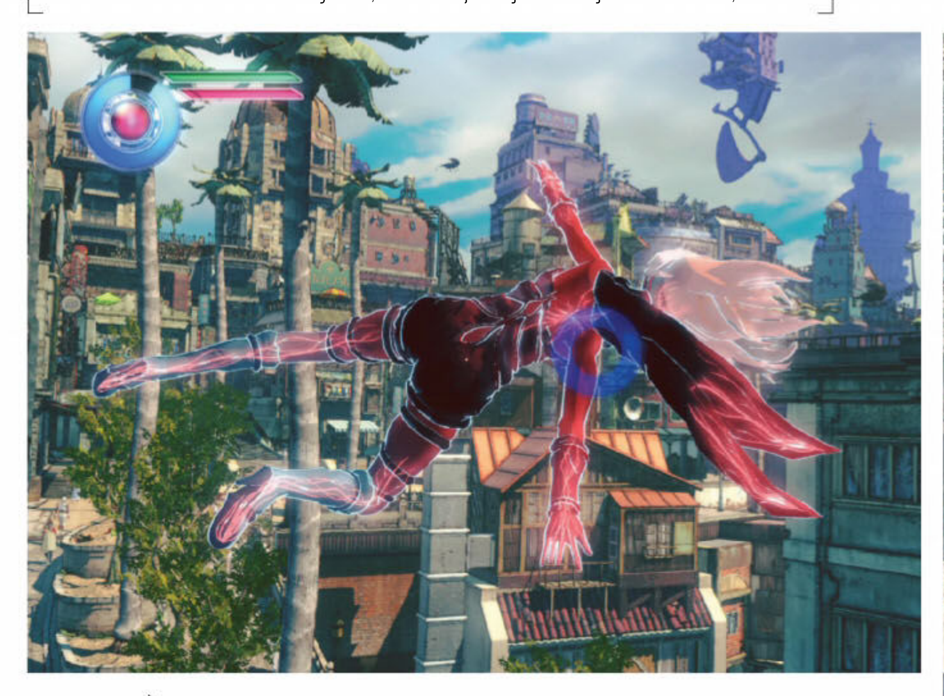
Multiplayer will factor in as well and it offers another twist. Rather than having players explore and complete constructed levels, up to four dreamers can actively build a level while someone else is playing it. The potential here for cooperation (and a healthy dose of trolling) here is huge, and could make for one of the most unique online experiences we've ever seen.



There are also several puzzle elements, such as switches and signs, that can be crafted. It's going to be a complex one.



■ Below: The original Gravity Rush was a visual and technical marvel on the truncated platform that was PlayStation Vita, but with all the power of PS4 at its disposal *Gravity Rush 2* looks crisper, cleaner and more beautifully cel-shaded than ever. Below Right: Kat returns as the no-nonsense hero for *Gravity Rush 2*, but she's also joined by former enemy turned sister-in-arms, Raven.





INFORMATION

Details

Format: PS4
Origin: Japan
Publisher: Sony
Developer: Project Siren
Release: TBC 2016

Developer Profile

Founded by *Silent Hill* director Keiichiro Toyama, Project Siren unsurprisingly made its mark developing the infinitely creepy Japanese horror series *Siren* before making the jump to the world of quaint handheld platforming. *Gravity Rush* proved a critical smash for the studio, but its exclusivity to the lukewarm PlayStation Vita probably didn't help its mainstream exposure.

Developer History

Siren
2003 [PS2]

Siren: Blood Curse
2008 [PS3]

Gravity Rush
2012 [Vita]

High Point

The original *Gravity Rush* remains one of the PS Vita's best offerings. In fact, the black-humoured open-world was so good it's getting a PS4 remaster treatment, much like the former Vita-locked *Tearaway Unfolded*.

Gravity Rush 2

CONCEPT ■ Cel-shaded open-world platformer where gravity can be controlled and manipulated at the touch of a DualShock 4 button. May contain a magical cat

Sony pulls the gravity-aping Kat out of the handheld bag

Back in 2012, PlayStation Vita owners (as few as there happened to be) were treated to an oddball platforming curio from a developer which had previously cut its serrated fangs in the horror genre. Playing like an interactive Sylvain Chomet film (with a splash of Studio Ghibli), *Gravity Rush* was a revelation, but it felt destined to go down with its under appreciated handheld platform. Until now…

Along with a remaster of the original (which is being tarted up for current-gen by the ever-reliable Bluepoint Games), Japanese developer Team Siren is finally returning to the vom-inducing world of Hekesville and plucky heroine Kat – and it's promising a bigger realm to explore, brand new powers and new debut of co-operative tag team moves with an AI friend.

The original *Gravity Rush* was all about re-approaching navigation, exploration and combat through the unusual and daunting prism of gravity, and it made for an exhilarating exercise in open-world gameplay. The sequel takes these core concepts and adds some new playstyles to the mix. Along with your normal ability to float in mid-air and turn any surface into your new terra firma, Team Siren has added Lunar, which makes Hekesville's gravity much lighter and navigation faster than ever. There's also Jupiter, which makes the gravitational pull a whole lot heavier.

Said heaviness will come in useful when you're facing off against the sequel's new cast of big bad bosses. The first game had some cracking boss encounters, so we're hoping all those new powers (including a gravitational slam that's clearly taken a few pointers from *Man Of Steel*'s city-crushing World Engine) mean there's a far more challenging plethora of enemies this time around that we can obliterate at breakneck speeds.

Co-op is also being added to the nauseating mix. Sadly, it isn't proper multiplayer (you can only team up with an AI partner), but it does make for some over-the-top moves that will no doubt come in useful when you're facing off against a particularly chunky enemy. Former antagonist from the original, Raven, will join you for some tag-team high jinks when *Gravity Rush 2* hits PS4 later this year – as to whether she'll be the only character you'll be teaming up with, well, Team Siren is keeping conspicuously quiet on that front…

All of these additions aren't exactly great revelations for the series – in fact, most of them are just expanding and polishing on the wonderful sense of freedom and control the PS Vita original offered four years ago – but the fact the Gravity Rush universe is being given a second chance on PS4 speaks volumes for Sony's confidence in Team Siren. In the meantime, you've now got the perfect reason to dust off that Vita and (reintroduce yourself to the gravitational pull of Kat and company.

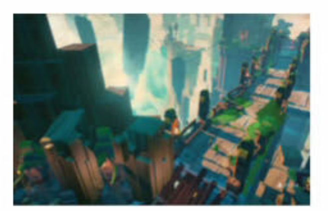
> "You'll be able to mix and match a wide variety of combat styles any way you want, so there'll be enough action to please Gravity veterans and new players alike"
>
> KEIICHIRO TOYAMA SCE JAPAN STUDIO

SHOWCASE

MORE TITLES TO WATCH FOR ON THE GAMING HORIZON

STORIES: THE PATH OF DESTINIES

Format: **PS4**
Publisher: **Spearhead Games**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **Q1 2016**



TAKING ITS narrative cues from Supergiant's *Bastion*, and fusing them with combat inspired by the *Batman* games, developer Spearhead looks to have conjured an intriguing role-playing brawler that touts choice and morality as key features. In *Stories*, you'll be pushed into making a series of decisions, each of which will impact the unfurling beats in the narrative, ultimately leading to one of 32 possible endings. There's a lot of potential here.

MANIFOLD GARDEN

Format: **PC, Mac, PS4**
Publisher: **William Chyr**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **Q2 2016**



BASED ON MC Esher's *Relativity*, *Manifold Garden* is the brainchild of installation artist, William Chyr, who has tried his hand at just about everything, from collaborations with Becks Beer to crafting a crowd-sourced novel. Chyr himself has described this gravity-shifting puzzler that infinitely wraps around itself as a game that attempts to explore 400 years of physics. If you get your jollies from that sort of thing, then you're in luck. If not, keep walking.

ALONE WITH YOU

Format: **PS4, PS VITA**
Publisher: **Benjamin Rivers Inc.**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **Q1 2016**



BENJAMIN RIVERS' PS4 exclusive and follow-up to the critically lauded *Home* eschews outright horror in favour of a sci-fi yarn (with a little dash of romance, for added flavour) that casts you in the role of a sole surviving terraformer tasked with escaping a planet set to explode in exactly one month. With half a dozen areas to explore and a nifty little AI companion to help fill in the blanks, *Alone With You* has certainly piqued our interests.

EPISTORY – TYPING CHRONICLES

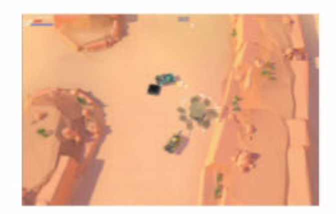
Format: **PC, Mac**
Publisher: **Fishing Cactus**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **Out Now (Steam Early Access)**



ALREADY AVAILABLE on Steam through the Early Access programme, *Epistory* is one of the stranger, yet intriguing game setups we've encountered this year. You play as a girl with memory loss, who also happens to be riding a giant fox. Yes, a giant fox. Honestly that's all you really need to know, other than the fact that yes, this is a typing game with an origami aesthetic. While it's still early days on Access, *Epistory* is worth checking out.

TANKWORK: COOPERATIVE TANK ACTION

Format: **PC**
Publisher: **Aplexio**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **2016 TBC**



EVERYONE LOVES tanks, right? That's the assumption developer Aplexio has come to with *Tankwork*, it's a rather pretty looking co-op based tank shooter that pits you and your buddies against a raft of enemies. Sadly at the time of writing we noticed that Aplexio had failed to reach its funding goal on Kickstarter. The developer has promised to finish the game, but may have to finds funds through work on smaller titles first.

THE TOWN OF LIGHT

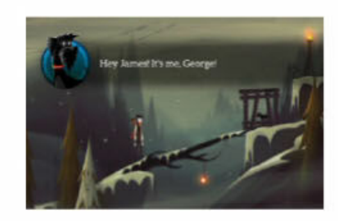
Format: **PC, Mac**
Publisher: **LKA.it**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **Q3 2016**



ITALIAN DEVELOPER LKA is brave, extremely brave, because it's attempting to tackle institutionalised child abuse and treatment of mental health patients in a video game. You play as Renee, a former patient of real-life asylum, Volterra, who returns there to find answers as to what happened to her during her time there. This is real horror, and although we're wary of the subject matter, we're equally interested in how it will handle it.

PINSTRIPE

Format: **PC, iOS**
Publisher: **Atmos Games**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **Q2 2016**



SET FOR release on Steam and iOS, *Pinstripe* is the brainchild of Thomas Brush, creator of *Coma* and *Skinny*. An adventure platformer, *Pinstripe* thrusts you into the role of Teddy, an ex-minister who finds himself in hell pursuing an entity claiming to be God that's kidnapped his three year old daughter, Bo. Interested? You should be. Built from the ground up by Brush, *Pinstripe* is gorgeous and intricate.

100FT ROBOT GOLF

Format: **PS4**
Publisher: **No Goblin**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **Q2 2016**

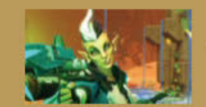


100FT ROBOT *Golf* really needs no explanation. You just need to play it. Cooked up by the mad geniuses at No Goblin, *Robot Golf* is being sold to the masses as a PlayStation VR title that blends 90s Mech-style animation with, erm, golf, in a fully destructible environment. Building in your way? Just push it over, or on top of another player standing in your way and that birdie on the 18th hole is yours for the taking.



DELAYED – Deus Ex: Mankind Divided

Mankind Divided has been delayed until August 23rd so Eidos Montreal can tweak accordingly. If it means we won't have to suffer the same horrible boss fights as its predecessor, then we say take as much time as you need.

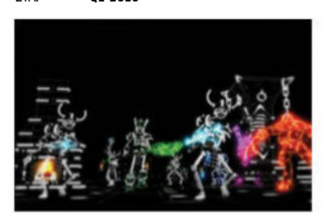


DELAYED – Battleborn

Gearbox's newest IP has suffered a minor delay of three months, meaning the game won't launch until 3rd May. Why? No doubt to ensure the experience is as good, if not better, than the mighty *Borderlands* series.

BRUTAL

Format: **PS4**
Publisher: **Stormcloud Games**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **Q1 2016**



BRUTAL IS a retro themed roguelike title that borrows its look from Disney's *Tron* and has been built from the ground up using ASCII. The setup's nothing out of the ordinary: choose a Ranger, Mage, Warrior or Amazon and traverse a procedurally generated world consisting of 26 different floors filled with hordes of enemies. Reach the 26th floor and defeat the Guardian and presto, you've claimed his crown and beat the game. Next.

FURI

Format: **PS4, PC**
Publisher: **The Game Bakers**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **Q2 2016**



FANS OF hack and slash games rejoice, because The Game Bakers has a treat in store for you. Essentially one long boss fight, *Furi*'s combat was inspired by the fast-paced and responsive Japanese games of yesteryear. Oh, and the art design has been created by none other than *Afro Samurai* creator, Takashi Okazaki, while creative director and game creator, Emeric Thoa promises a soundtrack filled with electro music.

DEAD STAR

Format: **PS4, PC**
Publisher: **Armature Studio**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **Q1 2016**



ANNOUNCED AS part of Sony's PlayStation Experience event in San Francisco, *Dead Star* is developer Armature Studio's ode to *Battlestar Galactica*'s episode 33, wherein the ship had to jump every 33 minutes in order to survive. Featuring 10v10 space brawls, *Dead Star* plonks you in the cockpit of upgradeable ships as you blast your way around procedurally generated levels while protecting huge bases in the outer reaches of space.

AURION: LEGACY OF THE KORI-ODAN

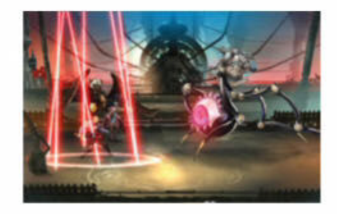
Format: **PC**
Publisher: **Kiro'o Games**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **Q2 2016**



SET IN an African fantasy world, *Aurion* is the brainchild of Cameroonian developer, Kiro'o Games. It recently passed the Steam Greenlight process and is currently on track for release sometime in 2016. *Aurion* sees a prince betrayed by his brother on his wedding day, who joins forces with his kick-ass bride to reclaim the kingdom and bust a few heads along the way. *Aurion* looks like it could be both fun and informative.

ZODIAC: ORCANON ODYSSEY

Format: **PS4, PS VITA**
Publisher: **Kobojo**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **Q2 2016**



RELEASED BACK in November on iOS as a premium turn-based JRPG, *Zodiac: Orcanon Odyssey*, is currently being ported by Kobojo to both PS4 and VITA for release sometime in 2016. Borrowing from the likes of *Final Fantasy* and *Dragon's Crown*, *Zodiac* features an expansive hero's journey styled narrative that skirts around some interesting themes in and amongst the lush visuals and combat, including racism and xenophobia.

WORLDS ADRIFT

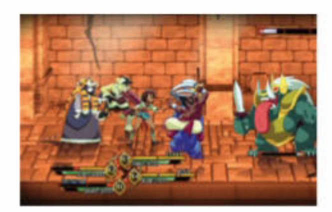
Format: **PC**
Publisher: **Bossa Studios**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **Q3 2016**



CRAFTED BY the same folk responsible for the weird and wonderful *Surgeon Simulator 2013* and *I Am Bread*, *Worlds Adrift* is an MMORPG with a difference: it's attempting to sidestep levelling up mechanics and boring XP systems and replace them with a world populated almost solely by player history. It's ambitious, radical and extremely exciting to see what the team are up to.

INDIVISIBLE

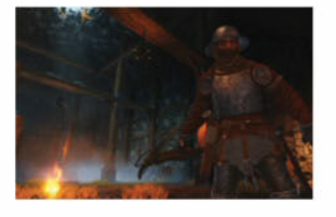
Format: **PC**
Publisher: **505 Games**
Developer: **Lab Zero Games**
ETA: **2017**



INDIVISIBLE LOOKS remarkably good even in its early stages of development. Fusing metroidvania-style exploration with brawling mechanics pinched from the likes of *Valkyrie Profile*, the game casts you as Ajna, a young girl on a globe-trotting journey in search of answers as to how she developed superpowers. There's a prototype available on Steam Early Access that we can't recommend enough. Download for a taste of what's in store.

SHADWEN

Format: **PC**
Publisher: **Frozenbyte Games**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **Q3 2016**



SHADWEN IS, according to the developer, a true stealth game, a re-awakening of a genre that died a long time ago with the advent of digital bullet festivals. Taking cues from the likes of *Thief*, *Shadwen*'s plot is simple: assassinate an evil King. The catch is that you gain a straggler, an orphan girl bearing witness to everything. Will you subject her to a bloody campaign or shield her from the horrors?



THE FIRST VR BLOCKBUSTER



games™ straps into EVE: Valkyrie to answer the all-important question: does VR finally have its first must-play triple-A game?

2016 is the year virtual reality ceases to be a part of a hazy futurist's dream and finally becomes, well, a reality. Oculus, HTC and Sony are all readying for the release of the first home-use displays, commercially available (and more importantly, affordable) hardware that threatens to be one of the most transformative and important pieces of technology humanity has seen in decades. But there isn't an architectural, medical, or even educational drive behind the emerging technology; it's videogames taking charge of this incredible innovation.

Virtual reality can offer the same escapism that's been so dangerously peddled by sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll over centuries – metaphysically sweeping the user away to a mind-altered state, regardless of time, place or age. This emerging tech might offer that same transformative opportunity, only it does it without the same side effects. It can turn us into adventurers or artists, or even – as *EVE: Valkyrie* has so successfully demonstrated – astronauts. Virtual reality's first triple-A blockbuster isn't just warping towards a new horizon for interactive entertainment, it's shooting for the stars too. »

» CHALLENGING YOUR **PRECONCEPTIONS**

"A lot of the time, we put people in VR and they won't move," chuckles *EVE: Valkyrie*'s lead designer Andrew Willans, acutely aware of how much of a shock to the system virtual reality can truly be. "You put this amazing headset on and you've got this whole world all around you. You can look to see where the enemy is in a three-dimensional space and target them, [but] people won't. Everyone just sits there facing forward… it's really hard to shake that mentality, to teach people that they can look around and do all of this fun stuff."

We are among the first in the world to get our hands on a near content-complete version of *Valkyrie*, as well as our eyes inside the consumer build of Oculus Rift. Faced with the prospect of spending a few hours – as opposed to minutes, which was the case with most VR demos we've experienced over the years – inside a virtual world summons a little terror interlaced with unbridled excitement in the pit of our stomach. Can VR really sustain a full gaming session or would the tech be revealed as the clever parlour trick we've always suspected it could be?

As with most VR related queries, all questions are answered with an Xbox One controller in the hands and a plastic box strapped to the face. The first step to understanding the power and potential of VR is to understand that it is, intrinsically, not a type of gaming experience that flourishes by the user "facing forward". And yet Willans knows better than anyone how difficult it can be to challenge instinctual and preconceived gaming habits.

Our first moments with *Valkyrie* had us sat in a glistening hanger bay; behemoth ships could be seen through a window to the right, a gorgeous star system off to the left. "Look behind you," he urges. We take a sheepish glance over our shoulder and see the hanger is clearly part of a much larger, sprawling ship. "No, seriously," Willans begins to plead, "look *behind* you." Almost leaning out of our chair we finally see what he means. There's a bar, the Crow's Nest, hiding there and neon-tinged walkways that look like they've been ripped straight out a next generation System Shock. That's when we *really* begin to look around, feverishly absorbing the sights and sounds of CCP's incredible creation. It's awe-inspiring, and we haven't even clambered into a cockpit yet. All we want to do is get up and explore, it's a space worth exploring, but we can't; there's an intergalactic war to be fought against the five pilots jacked into the game sat just across the way from us.

SEEING IS **BELIEVING**

It is very difficult to believe, or even understand, the appeal of a game like *Valkyrie* without experiencing it for yourself. The promise of VR gaming has always been incredible, if not slightly unbelievable. You sit down and strap on a pair of goggles, move nowhere, and yet you're transported *anywhere*. Getting your head around the 360-degree space, and understanding that what surrounds you isn't just set dressing but an integral part of the game experience is one of the biggest hurdles facing any adopter. A big part of the wonder and thrill comes from not only being surrounded by the chaos, but being completely, almost overwhelming part of it, and *Valkyrie* does a great job of making it feel like you're there. Not in a swivel chair looking like a deranged lunatic to bystanders, but off in the far reaches of space; participating in a battle that itself feels like it's been ripped straight from an episode of *Battlestar Galactica*. Studios such as Quantic Dream and Naughty Dog may have broken new ground in terms of cinematic flair and emotional resonance, but neither has ever truly transported you to a different world entirely. And for all that we can wax lyrical about it, it's still incredibly difficult to convey this in any tangible sense. It is an experience unlike any other we've had.

Still, CCP persists in pinning this down: "From day one, the goal was always to make you feel like a badass space pirate. Think Tom Cruise in *Top Gun*, but in space." That's an irresistible sales pitch from Willans. It's also a design decision that has led the development of *Valkyrie* over the years. But is it enough to sell virtual reality to the doubters and tech-enthusiast general public?

Oculus thinks it is. So much so that the company has thrown its faith and full support behind the title. "*EVE: Valkyrie* is one of the most anticipated virtual reality games, and one of the first true VR games to go into development," says Palmer Luckey, founder of the (now Facebook-owned) Oculus. "It perfectly captures the promise of immersive gaming, shooting you into a sci-fi adventure as you pilot a spaceship in search of combat. Battling your friends (and enemies) in multiplayer space dogfights is the ultimate VR thrill, and we're excited to partner with CCP to bring this experience to Rift owners everywhere."

> "IN TERMS OF THE MOTION SICKNESS, THERE'S ABSOLUTELY NONE OF THAT. NOBODY GETS ILL, NOBODY GETS SICK"

Every pre-order of Oculus Rift will include a copy *EVE: Valkyrie*. It's being positioned as the first VR system seller – the equivalent of Sega bundling *Alex Kidd* in with the Master System, or the Game Boy with *Tetris* – and that's because *Valkyrie* has come on leaps and bounds since it was first revealed three years ago. From tech demo to triple-A package: *Valkyrie* is the first game to really show what VR can really do. Willans says "it's an honour" for Oculus to put so much trust and responsibility in the studio - but that honour also brings a great deal of pressure.

"I'm glad they think highly enough of us that we are part of that [launch program]," beams Willans. "It feels awesome; we are buzzing about it. It's a tremendous achievement, and I'm really proud. We've had a great relationship with Oculus all throughout development, they've been very supportive, given us all of the right tech at all the right times," he continues. "But it's a responsibility as well. We need to be polished way above and beyond what's expected. We need it to be like, 'Oh my god, this is the number one killer VR game'." »



■ *EVE: Valkyrie* won't feature a traditional single-player campaign. Instead it has been built around thrilling five versus five online dogfights; though the studio is experimenting with upping the player count.







Playing *EVE: Valkyrie* is quite unlike anything else you would have ever experienced. It fully immerses you in a spaceship and lets you experience visceral dogfights in ways *Ace Combat* could only dream of.

DEVELOPMENT TIMELINE: FROM TECH DEMO TO TRIPLE-A TRAILBLAZER

It's taken three years to turn this ship around

FIRST STEPS
2012
Following the arrival of Oculus on Kickstarter in 2012, *EVE Online* developer CCP dived into the VR arena by pledging to the campaign, secretly beginning development on *EVE-VR* with an early development kit. The bare bones for *Valkyrie* were created here: a space-dogfighting tech demo with a strong focus on immersion.

THE REVEAL
2013
After a year of development, *EVE-VR* made its debut at EVE Fanfest and the response was rather spectacular. Up until this point, VR was still fairly conceptual, with only the likes of id Software with *Doom 3* really stepping up to experiment with the tech.

GRADUAL EVOLUTION
2013
With *Valkyrie* beginning to overshadow *EVE: Online* expansions and stealing attention away from new FPS Dust 514, CCP finally announced it would be taking *EVE-VR* into full development; it's here it began to evolve from a tech demo to a fully-fledged game.

BECOMING REALITY
2014
By this point, *EVE Valkyrie* has been revealed as much more than a tech demo – it was an experience that people couldn't stop talking about. It's here where the buzz truly began to generate, catching the attention of Sony and landing itself on PlayStation 4 through PlayStation VR.

STAYING ON TARGET
2015
This is the year CCP really went for it. At Fanfest 2015, the studio revealed new ship classes, game modes and a re-designed flight model. It's this move that established *Valkyrie* as a title with the depth and potential to be a full, system-selling game experience.

OCULUS DEAL
2015
Following a highly successful three-year development cycle, the now Facebook-owned Oculus reveals it is bundling *Valkyrie* in with every pre-ordered Oculus Rift unit. The game barely resembles the tech demo from 2013; the strides forward in both gameplay and technology helping to forge a new future for truly immersive gaming.

THE RIDE OF YOUR LIFE

Detailing the ship types of EVE: Valkyrie

Movement speed and weapon loadouts are defined by the type of vessel you take into battle. With three to choose from – and a healthy amount of customisation options letting you modify everything from cosmetics to creating hybrid classes as you level up and gain EXP – there's a surprising amount of depth to the system. Keeping a healthy balance between the ships is also important as you're able to take four configurations into battle, switching between them as you die; think of them like your loadout.



WRAITH MARK II

■ FIGHTER CLASS

"The Fighter Class – if you were to put it in traditional FPS terms – the Fighter is our assault class," says Andrew Willans. "It's a really good all-rounder; good for speed, good for armour, it's the middle ground of ships. It has gatling gun cannon fire on a fixed reticule, mapped to the right trigger. On the left trigger, you have look-to-lock missiles."



SPECTRE MARK I

■ HEAVY CLASS

"It's basically the tank class. Heavily armoured and a little slower than the other classes, but the trade-off is that you have a little more protection," says Willans. "It has a shotgun blast for massive splash damage [and] it's also got an ability called the Micro-Warp Drive. This is to help you get out of (or into) trouble, it's effectively a short speed boost for your slow-moving ship - think of it like Sprinting."



BANSHEE MARK I

■ SUPPORT CLASS

"You could think of the Support class as you would the traditional medic," says Willans. "It has the ability to heal team-mates; it's got a look-to-lock multi-purpose beam, and if people on your team are in need of buffing it will charge their shield. It can however, drain the shield of your enemies. It's also got traditional cannons and deployable Spider-bots - a multipurpose attack that is dropped like a mine."

■ *EVE: Valkyrie* was so good at immersing us within its world that we often found ourselves having to touch the table in front of us to make sure we were still seated, and not off exploring a galaxy somehow.

"OUR GOAL WAS ALWAYS TO MAKE YOU A COMPETENT PILOT IN MINUTES, BUT TO HAVE A MASTERY OF THE CONTROLS OVER A PERIOD OF MONTHS"

■ Once you get the feel for *EVE: Valkyrie's* basic movement model and controls, the scope of the experience really starts to shine through. It'll certainly reward those that stick with it.



Thanks to the focus on player progression, ship customisation, game modes and maps; *EVE: Valkyrie* has enough content to give it legs as a triple-A game experience.

» AN UNLIKELY **SUCCESS**

For all intents and purposes, *Valkyrie* shouldn't be the game that's pitched to sell VR. A product selling itself on the success of *Star Wars*, *Battlestar*, *Star Trek* or, you know, any piece of story-based entertainment set in the stars, has immediate and obvious appeal beyond hardcore gamers. A multiplayer-focused, player-versus-player VR dogfighting game does not. It's a niche within a niche, stuffed inside another niche that nobody quite understands yet. But unlike Capcom's nightmare-inducing *The Kitchen* or Crytek's mountaineering-experience *The Climb*, *Valkyrie* is no mere tech demo. It's a fully-fledged game with a big budget; it looks gorgeous, and all it takes is one adventure into the galaxy to be sold on the concept.

Sat at the helm of a beautifully detailed ship, you can look all around the cockpit. Looking down you'll see a body and notice that it moves in tandem with your own – tracked in real-time by the Oculus 3D Positional Tracking Camera – and your character's fingers twitch as you control the direction of your vessel with a gamepad. Look directly above and off in the distance you'll notice the red trails of enemy ships closing in on your position. When Willans explained that *Valkyrie* is "very visceral, [as] we're putting you *in* the pilot's seat… we are able to deliver the Holy Grail of immersion." Ahead of our session, we have to admit we had our doubts, but that changed incredibly quickly.

"It's interesting because I think it's going to be awe-inspiring for everyone," Willans admits, though he is quick to say that the appeal of *Valkyrie* will be different dependent to your relationship with gaming. "As a gamer, you're kind of aware of what a shooter is, you know what a space shooter is; you know, you have certain baggage that you will bring to that event, and I still don't think that destroys that sense of wonder when you put on a headset. And I think you'll get a different kind of wonder from someone who isn't a gamer."

A lot of this is a result of CCP's commitment to tailoring the experience to any sort of consumer that might be interested in picking up Oculus Rift and *Valkyrie* when it launches in March 2016. After our hands-on session we are convinced that fans of space games, aerial dogfighting and FPS fans will fall in love with *Valkyrie*'s easy-to-understand gameplay mechanics and familiar language. But this needs to appeal to a wider audience than CCP is traditionally used to catering to – and Willans has been on-hand to ensure that a non-gamer can get just as much joy out of the experience as we might.

"Player comfort is in the hands of the developers. It's a responsibility that we have; we are just trying to make sure that *Valkyrie* is as polished and as [player] friendly as it can be for when we ship. It's so that I can give the headset to my dad and he can just play, that's the goal," considers Willians, before regaling us with tales of his family finally understanding what the veteran triple-A developer has been doing for a living for so many years. "And that's not just a bullshit story, he did the other week. To get him in – you know, he took me to see *Star Wars* when I was a kid – and now I could be like 'Dad, let me show you what I do for a living'. He wasn't doing anything, just sitting there and looking around, totally in awe of it… And it was a great 'Holy shit' moment to get a text from him at two in the morning going 'the more I think about it the more it was just awesome…' and that was awesome [for me]. It's going to hit people in waves, different people have different reactions."

SO, IS IT VR'S FIRST **BLOCKBUSTER**?

We're confident in claiming that there's nothing more immediately impressive than *Valkyrie* in the VR pipeline right now, but CCP has clearly had to work hard to ensure *Valkyrie* is as enjoyable to play as it is to immerse yourself in. That said, the studio has cut a lot of chaff from the experience to ensure it's as easy to get involved in the real fun as possible. A casualty of this mindset – and realities with the budget and production costs – is the traditional single-player campaign. *Valkyrie* will not feature a story mode, though it will have light PvE elements essentially designed to let you show the game off to friends and family.

Recall mode lets you dive into DNA fragments recovered from dead pilots so that you can relive their memories and get a better sense of the wider *EVE* universe; Survival sees you battling against waves of A.I. enemies; Scout gives you an opportunity to explore CCP's gorgeous areas without fear of being mercilessly gunned down. If none of these PvE modes sound particularly exciting, it's because they aren't. They are but gateways into the real core of *Valkyrie*: the online, five versus five competitive multiplayer.

In many respects, you should throw out any misconceptions you have about dogfighting games immediately, if you have any. »

OCULUS RIFT LAUNCH DETAILS

Everything you need to know about the release of VR

PRICE
£499 / $599

RELEASE DATE
28 March 2016

BUNDLED WITH
Oculus Rift headset, Oculus 3D Positional Tracking Camera, Oculus Rift remote, Xbox One controller, *EVE: Valkyrie* and *Lucky's Tale*.

RECOMMENDED SPECS TO RUN OCULUS RIFT

Graphics card:
NVIDIA GTX 970 / AMD R9 290 equivalent or greater

Processor:
Intel i5-4590 equivalent or greater

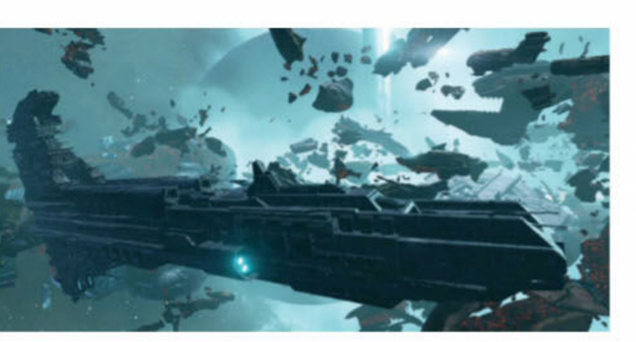
Memory:
8GB+ RAM

Output:
Compatible HDMI 1.3 video output

Input:
3x USB 3.0 ports plus 1x USB 2.0 port

Operating system:
Windows 7 SP1 64 bit or newer

ESTIMATED COST: £800





■ While CCP toyed with graphic death scenes, it instead opted to have your character freeze after the cockpit is breached. It's still incredibly terrifying.

The very nature of VR has ironed out many of the problems and annoyances that would usually accompany this type of genre game – enemy tracking and navigation are the two big ones. CCP has spent years refining the controls, ensuring action is as intuitive as possible. While you'll be able to use Flight Sticks at launch – as well as Oculus Touch when it eventually launches later in 2016 - CCP has seemingly designed *Valkyrie* around the included Xbox One gamepad.

"When you're in VR, we need everything to be as immediate and intuitive as possible, so we aren't going to ask you to do twenty different controls just to use your weapons; a lot of them use the same inputs," considers Willans. "We spent a lot of time refining the game controls and the feeling of being in a space ship, so that it's got that immediate pick up and play vibe to it. Our goal was always to make you a competent pilot in minutes, but to have a mastery of the controls over a period of months."

And how does this translate in-game? In a word: fantastically. While the game modes might be familiar to FPS fans – with *Valkyrie* offering Team Deathmatch, CFT and Domination variants as its PvP modes – the gameplay is anything but familiar. It all comes back to what Willans was so desperate for us to do at the start of our session: looking around. Once you understand that you can use the *whole* space in front of you, *Valkyrie* transforms from an interesting idea to an experience that just isn't available from any other developer or platform. The complete field of vision allows you to track multiple targets in real time in all directions. "This is what led to the development of the look-to-lock system," says Willans. "What you do is you hold the Left Trigger down, and it brings up a different reticule – it looks like a revolver on a pistol, you'll see missiles loading into this revolver – and once that's loaded you need to look for an enemy, it'll soft snap and then you need to try and maintain that lock [with your eyes], follow the enemy to release your salvo of lock on missiles."

"WHEN YOU'RE IN VR, WE NEED EVERYTHING TO BE AS IMMEDIATE AND INTUITIVE AS POSSIBLE"

If an enemy speeds past you, there's no need to try and follow; you could physically stand up – in real life - turn around as if to peer through the back window of your ship and continue to work to nail the lock on while speeding full throttle through space. Or, if you'd rather, you can pull your ship to a fierce halt and force it around on a pivot before unleashing a barrage of mini-gun fire at your aggressor. In spite of the simple controls, you have tremendous command over your spaceship; deftly piloting one of the three ship types through debris, gunfire and around asteroids and disengaged space stations produces an adrenaline rush the likes of which we've never experienced before.

IS IT THE **SYSTEM SELLER** IT NEEDS TO BE?

It's all about acclimatising to the tech. While *Valkyrie* is incredibly impressive, it's all about the little moments that really sell it as a legitimate step forward for gaming. It's the way your skin crawls as the pitter-patter of enemy fire washes over your ship's hull. The way you squeeze through a narrow gap in a debris field to try and shake off an enemy, before using a barrel roll to reverse your positions and fortune. It's when you realise you're gritting your teeth, waving your head and body around desperately as you try and out-manoeuvre and out-gun three enemy ships approaching from all angles.

As CCP looks to wrap up development and get *Valkyrie* enveloping players in its insane action, it has two major elements to focus on. The first is centred around communication. After spending a few hours with the game we didn't encounter any moments of motion sickness, but we did feel physically and mentally exhausted by the entire experience. We hate to keep harping on about immersion, but it really does make you believe you are in another place entirely, and that's draining. CCP has a responsibility to communicate restraint to its players, though the studio admits it is largely out of their hands.

"In terms of the motion sickness, there's absolutely none of that. If you were to barrel roll continually, you'll get dizzy; but guess what, if you stand here on the spot and spin three times you are going to get dizzy – that's not VR, that's just life. Nobody gets ill, nobody gets sick, there's no [limitation] saying you can only do it for this long," affirms Willans. "It's really up to the user to manage their game time, just like anything else. It isn't something that's exclusive to VR, let's put it that way."

That's less a problem on CCP's end, and a reality of new technology that we will all need to figure out as we move forward. The other responsibility for CCP at this stage is to ensure it can guide players into the VR world and keep them there. From what we've played so far, we're impressed with *Valkyrie*'s accessibility – not to mention the way in which it combines that with a genuine sense of fun and awe.

This will be the first VR game many people play when they pick up Oculus Rift this year, and it's already showing that it has the quality and depth to prove that the tech is well worth indulging in. It takes triple-A production values and conquers gaming's final frontier – not only letting you experience a phenomenal game world, but actually putting you inside of it. *Valkyrie* is a fast and furious PvP multiplayer game the likes of which we haven't played before. Whether that furious entertainment can persist past the first handful of hours is anyone's guess, but it's likely that your first jaunt into enemy-occupied space will be a gaming memory you hold onto for the rest of your life.

DETAILING THE PROGRESSION SYSTEM

Where would a triple-A game be without longevity?

EVE: Valkyrie is a multiplayer-focused PvP game, and as such, it will have a complementary progression system to keep players engaged long after the initial thrill dissipates. "Every time you fly each class of ship, you'll earn EXP for that particular type of class. That EXP will then unlock more ships of that class and upgrades within the progression," details Willans for the first time. "You can take out different ships in battles; so you could go out with a Fighter and a Heavy in your load out and use both ships and [the game] will total up the EXP you've earned with each class at the end of the match – that then feeds into a central pool of XP, which we denote your Pilot rank from. We call it The Pilot Reputation System, which is the sub-total of all of that XP and that gives you your rank."

THE MUST-OWN **VR** GAMES

These six games will make the VR investment worth while

CHRONOS



■ This innovative third-person RPG has you attempting to navigate a beautifully designed labyrinth that, upon failure doesn't kill you but instead throws you out and sees you character age a full year before you can attempt it again – forcing you play in different styles to account for your ageing adventurer.

EDGE OF NOWHERE



■ From *Sunset Overdrive* developer Insomniac Games, *Edge Of Nowhere* attempts to blend the platforming of *Uncharted* with the snowy survival-horror themes of Greg Rucka's *Whiteout* in this daring third-person adventure that sees your head-movement controlling the camera. It is one of Oculus Rift's most terrifying games on the near horizon.

LUCKY'S TALE



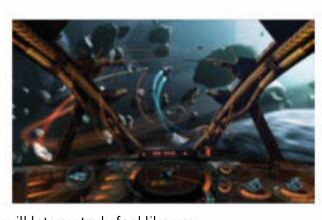
■ Picking up an Oculus Rift? Then you'll have access to *Lucky's Tale* automatically, a fun and colourful adventure with a design that should conjure fond memories of *Super Mario 64* and *Banjo & Kazooie*. This is a big-budget endeavour that's looking to prove VR's versatility in the gaming space.

ADR1FT



■ If Sandra B's disastrous space-station adventures taught us anything in *Gravity*, it's that the galaxy can be a harsh and cruel environment. If you fancy feeling like you're constantly about to suffocate, *ADR1FT* is using Oculus Rift to evoke a similar tone to the 2013 blockbuster hit.

ELITE DANGEROUS



■ *Elite Dangerous* is already out, of course, but it's the Oculus Rift integration that has us really excited. Already proven to be one of the very best space exploration games out there, VR support will let you truly feel like you are drifting through the final frontier.

EURO TRUCK SIMULATOR 2



■ Now, now, hear us out before you turn up your nose. *Euro Truck Simulator 2* is proof that VR can support games that aren't directly tooled to space-games and horror experiences. *Euro Truck* invites you on a strangely comfortable, entirely relaxing and oddly beautiful road trip across Europe.



DELAYED GRATIFICATION

Can Remedy pull together one the most complex undertakings in videogame history as time finally runs out for Quantum Break?

Looking back, it's actually a little surprising that Microsoft put so much faith in Remedy. When *Quantum Break* was first revealed alongside the Xbox One on that disastrous day back in April 2013 – the day the generation war was waged and wasted – Microsoft needed the ever-faithful second party studio to make good on its commitment to blending live-action television with high-octane gameplay, and it needed it quickly. But two release windows passed without note, Microsoft swiftly ditched its silver screen ambitions, and we've been left wondering whether *Quantum Break* would be crushed by the weight of its own ambition, frozen in time as a warning to those attempting to dictate to gamers what they supposedly want. But we've seen it in action and that thought couldn't be further from the truth. Well, you know what they say, hindsight's a bit of a bitch. With the 5 April launch date fast approaching, *Quantum Break* is hoping to prove itself as a bold storytelling experiment that's quite unlike anything you've ever experienced before.





■ The time manipulation powers are big on cinematic flair and bombast, *Quantum Break* is unmistakably a game from Remedy Entertainment.

The ultimate Remedy experience

In an example of life imitating art, Remedy seems to work at a pace most might associate with a bullet-time shootout. While the studio just celebrated its twentieth anniversary, it has put out five games in that period – and seven of those years were spent pushing the perpetually-delayed *Alan Wake* out of the door. But there's a reason Remedy likes to take its time, and that's because it likes to take gambles. And *Quantum Break* is perhaps its riskiest venture yet; a time-amplified action-shooter that is without question one of the most complex undertakings in videogame history. This experimental release is attempting to effortlessly blend interactive gameplay and live-action drama to form a cohesive overarching narrative. It might have felt like time has been stuttering around the project, but when it does eventually land, it's going to do it – as we're certain both *Max Payne* and *Alan Wake* would appreciate – in style.

> "It comes down to Remedy's unwillingness to compromise on any aspect of its games, be it cinematic flair, scope, graphical fidelity or ambition"

"Remedy is a relatively small developer with about 100 people working on *Quantum Break*, so we have to work smartly to be able to compete with the bigger studios out there," considers Thomas Puha, Remedy's communications director and one of the six developers that games™ spoke to as we attempted to uncover the mysteries behind the Xbox One's most intriguing exclusive. We found it fascinating that Puha should mention trying to compete with other, larger studios... The likes of Naughty Dog, Gearbox and Insomniac are all studios with a similar legacy to that of Remedy's own, though the American studios have been far more prolific in the same time period. It comes down to Remedy's unwillingness to compromise on any aspect of its games – be it cinematic flair, scope, graphical fidelity or ambition – and that's only made possible by "using tools and software that help us produce great results with a smaller team."

Looking at the content-complete build of *Quantum Break*, you wouldn't believe it has been created by such a small and fluid team; the results are rather impressive. The all-new proprietary Northlight Engine is allowing Remedy to deliver stunning 1080p visuals without compromising on a smooth 30 frames-per second, leading us to believe Quantum Break will be deliver the Xbox One's much anticipated '*Gears Of War*' moment, if you will. When it all comes together, the gameplay and third-person combat blends the style and flair of *Max Payne* with the frantic pace of *Alan Wake*; and, yes, the TV show element looks of a decent enough quality that it will likely put SyFy programming to shame. This all stems from a commitment to not only harness emerging technology – such as full-motion body capture and new techniques to squeeze more power out of the Xbox One in lieu of Kinect – but to stay true to the roots of the studio as it was first established back in 1995.

Humble beginnings

There's an interesting story behind the humble beginnings of Remedy. It's the tale of a group of hacker kids stuck in Finland, building games to help remedy their own boredom. The groups "competed in the excellence of programmes consisting of coding tricks synced with music and beautiful graphics," as Saku Lehtinen, Remedy's



■ *Quantum Break* is without question one of the best-looking games on Xbox One. It's a huge statement of intent.

franchise art director, recalls. It's here where the founding members of the studio developed the skills and relentless determination that would later allow them to remedy our own boredom through the likes of *Death Rally* and *Max Payne*. It's a great story, but it's one Wikipedia can detail about as well as we can. What Wikipedia can't do, however, is explain to you how *Quantum Break*'s grand transmedia experiment is going to work, the inspiration behind it and why it isn't going to tank completely.

When we describe *Quantum Break* as one of the most complex undertakings in videogame history, that isn't complete conjecture. At its core, *Quantum Break* is an intense, story-driven action game focused on spectacle and attention-arresting shootouts – it's a Remedy game. But one where "the game focuses on the heroes, the in-game live-action show focuses on what goes on in the enemy camp. inside Monarch Solutions," as Puha says, and this where things begin to get really interesting.

"The *Quantum Break* live action show is unlike any other experience; we allow you to direct the experience by interacting with the narrative and choosing the shows direction using the game's junction moments... the live action show you're watching is directed by your choices" confirms narrative designer Greg Louden, hoping to quell any fears that a scripted show might remove the feeling of control and agency from the overall experience.

"We have multiple crossover locations in both the live action show and game experience, so the show will showcase one area and perspective, but in the game experience you can examine optional story-telling and look around the entire location providing even more control and agency for players" he says, adding. "All in all, on top of being an innovative triple-A action experience, players will also have agency through determining the direction of the live action show."

If it wasn't enough that Remedy is trying to merge two entertainment formats, it is also ensuring you have some degree of control over the way they merge, as well. As you are no doubt aware by now, the entire *Quantum Break* experience is framed around a failed time travel experiment at River Port University, this is where "the hero, Jack Joyce, is caught in the blast of the failed experiment and gains the power to manipulate time... he is fighting to stop the end of time, and time is literally running out," creative director Sam Lake enthuses. While the face of *Max Payne* sure does love to go over that pitch, we understand why; the bones of *Quantum Break* were actually formed during the development of *Alan Wake* many years back, as Lake attempted to include a science-fiction twist into the supernatural thriller.

> "QUANTUM BREAK IS WITHOUT QUESTION ONE OF THE MOST COMPLEX UNDERTAKINGS IN VIDEOGAME HISTORY"

So while you'll spend the majority of your time running around as Joyce (played by Shawn Ashmore), attempting to both stop time from permanently freezing and fighting against friend-turned-enemy Paul Serene (played by Aidan Gillan), you will actually take control of Serene at certain moments in the game. "You'll play an act of the game [and] at the end of each act you'll get to play a Junction Moment with the story's villain Paul Serene," details Puha, hinting towards the time-bending abilities of the main adversary.

The live action scenes bring fresh insight and perspective into Remedy's larger narrative. As Serene, you'll be able to make choices that affect the direction of the story – these Junction Moments are the lead-in to one of the 20 minute episodes, with alternative scenes recorded to ensure your choices are appropriately reflected throughout the game. One such example sees Serene having the option to either



The live-action elements make up around 80 minutes of content in the final game, with episodes launching between chapters to bring new context to the world.

Building a believable protagonist

Creative director Sam Lake walks us through his character creation process

"I feel that an interesting character needs to be layered. In an action game, where the stakes are high and the hero is fighting to save the world, it needs to be a personal conflict and an internal conflict as well. In the best case, the external threat is linked to the internal threat; they are each other's mirror images. All of our heroes – Max Payne, Alan Wake and Jack Joyce – are trying to mend (or in Max's case, avenge) their families, and with that, themselves. All of them on some level feel that it's their fault, so there's an element of guilt involved, and that's as personal as it gets. Wake's marriage is in trouble, he has an argument with his wife and at that moment the forces of darkness kidnap her. He feels it's his fault. Without his wife he is a broken man, he has to save her to save himself.

"The only family Jack Joyce has is his older brother; their parents are dead. Legally, his older brother was his guardian when he was underage, but in many ways it was the other way around. Jack, the younger brother, did all the work to keep his family going until he had enough and then he left. At the beginning of *Quantum Break* he returns, only to find that trusting his best friend more than his brother has been a terrible, fatal mistake and that his brother has always had his best interests in mind. By then, however, it's already too late and both his brother and himself – as well as the whole world – is in terrible danger, and it's his fault. That's where we start off. The layers and the flaws make the heroes interesting and more human; someone we can believe in, someone we can root for."

execute a young woman that witnessed one of his evil deeds; kill her and protestors will show up later in the game to rally against Monarch, the time-sucking corporation formed by Serene during his time-hopping adventures. Opt to blackmail her on the other hand, and you might see a scene where Joyce interacts with the witness directly. They are small alterations, of course; the story of *Quantum Break* has a fixed and finite ending that all players will see, but the choices you make throughout are designed to bring more agency to the experience than we had previously anticipated.

Live action aspirations

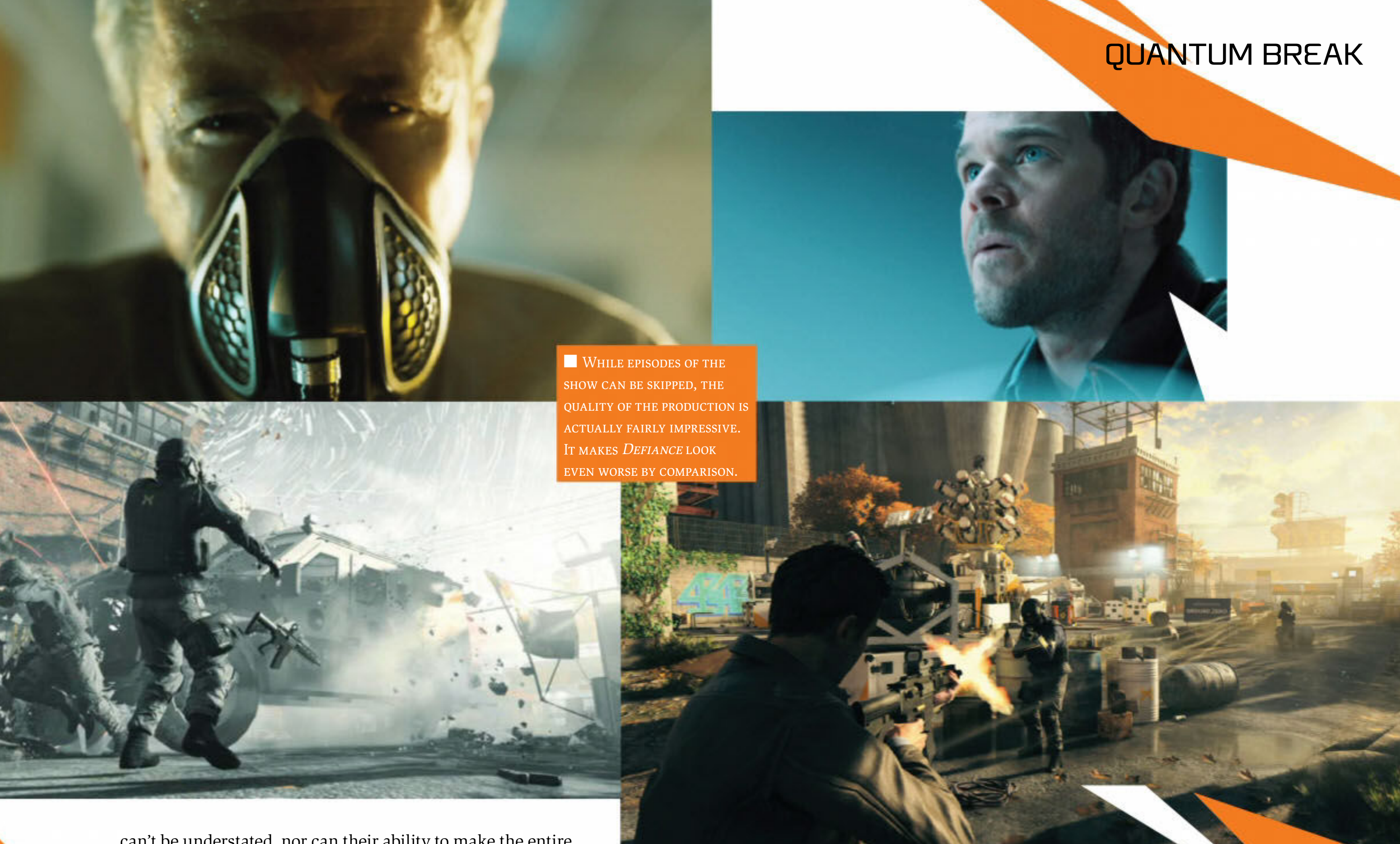
As we mentioned before, the quality of the show is much higher than you might expect from what you're expecting from a game/TV hybrid – bringing in Hollywood talent will do that to a project. Where *Quantum Break* really succeeds though, is in how it manages to bridge its two components. The actors in the show reprise their roles in the game, and Remedy has worked hard to ensure there is as little disparity between the two. This is one of *Quantum Break*'s most impressive achievements and could do wonders to restoring the Xbox One's reputation in the power-struggle between it and the PlayStation 4.

"Shawn Ashmore and Aiden Gillen are both, as is the rest of our cast, excellent at what they do. We can get their performance into the game with almost no loss in the nuances of their performances which has taken a lot of effort. So it's really their entire performance that is in the game, and of course all that goes to waste if our story and dialogue is not up to scratch," comments Puha as we question the impact the actors have had on the project. "I think we are delivering our best work ever with *Quantum Break*. Having great, believable actors is really important and we're thrilled with the cast we've been able to assemble working with our partners at Microsoft… these bigger names bring along more recognition which hopefully encourages people who are less into video games to be curious about what *Quantum Break* is about."

"What our technology allows us to do is imbue our characters with the personality and presence the actors bring to them in a way that games traditionally have struggled with," continues Mikko Rautalahti, the story team manager and writer at Remedy. "Not just in providing characters that look like the actors who portray them, but in translating their performances to the digital characters you interact with. It's my hope that this is something the audience recognises and connects with. This is an area of game technology that's constantly progressing by leaps and bounds, and it's exciting to be where we are with it.

Speaking with the studio, it's easy to understand why the team is so overjoyed with the results. The push for one-for-one likeness was born from a disappointment with *Alan Wake*'s final quality, and it's clear fans of Remedy and cinematic action game alike will be thrilled by the final product. "I'll be frank: the facial animation in *Alan Wake* wasn't what we hoped for," says Rautalahti. "As a company that places a lot of importance on story-telling and characters, we made it a special priority to improve on that front. It has been an intense learning process for us, but I think the results speak for themselves."

When it comes down to it, *Quantum Break* is a massive risk for both Microsoft and Remedy. But the more we see of the title, the more its promise excites us for the future of videogames. While the four episodes of the show are entirely optional – they can be skipped and viewed at a later date or avoided entirely – the context they bring to the experience



■ While episodes of the show can be skipped, the quality of the production is actually fairly impressive. It makes *Defiance* look even worse by comparison.

can't be understated, nor can their ability to make the entire *Quantum Break* package feel more fresh and exciting than anything else on the near horizon.

And that's exactly what *Quantum Break* needs. Despite the game being content-complete, Remedy is still yet to put the game in the hands of the players or press. Its action looks as bombastic as you'd expect, though it doesn't seem to be as awe-inspiring as *Max Payne*'s bullet-time infused action or *Alan Wake*'s light and shadow dynamic. Jack Joyce has the ability to freeze and manipulate time, which consequently makes him look like a more capable protagonist than any of Remedy's previous protagonists. At its core, *Quantum Break* seems to rely more on cover-shooting convention than we were perhaps anticipating as we viewed a hands-off demo.

The fun of the game itself will largely come down to how well Jack's suite of powers are implemented into combat. Elements such as Time Stop forms a localised sphere of frozen time; letting Jack fire bullets into the void, holding them in stasis before they explode out at the collapsing bubble causing massive damage to anybody caught in the blast. Time Shield deflects bullets by halting time in front of Jack, while Time Rush lets you freeze a firefight and quickly dash between cover and enemies at mind-bending speeds. While each of these powers is controlled by a cooldown timer – not to mention be upgraded throughout the adventure through collectable Chronon sources – it still all feels a little over-powered. Some Monarch enemies are also able to manipulate time, and it'll likely be these encounters that bring the action to life.

In fact, bringing this action to life has been a struggle for Remedy. The process of freezing environments and enemy routines has brought with it a wealth of development problems that – along with re-castings, re-shoots, and the removal of Beth Wilder as a playable protagonist – are the likely cause of the delays to *Quantum Break* over the years. "The enemies are essentially dealing with a time manipulating super hero who is able to navigate through the battlefield in a split second and freeze time at will. That poses a unique challenge for creating a believable AI behaviour for anyone who has to face Jack in combat," game director Mikael Kasurinen says, describing what sounds like a torturous development cycle. "Using the time powers combined with environmental hazards and surroundings, stuttering in time can lead to a multitude of complicated and dynamic situations, and the enemies need to cope with all of that through animations, voice acting and tactics. You can imagine how complicated it gets when all this functionality needs to be orchestrated into a combat scenario," he adds, "involving for instance a crashing train stuttering back and forth in time. Getting all these mechanics finally working well together was incredible rewarding, especially when the end result is such a unique and mind-bending experience."

> "The enemies are essentially dealing with a time-manipulating super hero who is able to navigate through the battlefield in a split second and freeze time at will"

A unique and mind-bending experience, that's really the best way to describe *Quantum Break*. When it launches in April, for better or worse, it's going to be the ultimate Remedy game. The culmination of twenty years of standing out from the crowd as a studio; the result of will and determination of a small group of developers that want to push the medium forward while cementing its own brand of style and flair to the action genre. *Quantum Break* might not be the success Microsoft needs it to be, but that's okay, because this shooter from Remedy is daring to be different in a time of copycat blandness. Success or failure, *Quantum Break* is going to be one of the most complex and bizarre experiences to ever grace videogames, and you have to respect it – and Remedy – for trying something new in the next generation.

Far Cry goes back to the past to present us the future of the franchise

PRIMAL EVOLUTION



Let's be honest. While there are examples of successful series that have taken wildly unexpected turns in recent years – *Metal Gear Solid* and *Super Mario* being the two obvious standouts from 2015 – they are precious few in number. Games that are part of a wider, successful franchise tend not to rock the boat too much when it comes to their design choices and settings. Fewer still have swum against the current and *succeeded* in providing their audiences with something worthy of their respective franchise's lofty status.

Sticking to a tested formula is the safer option when it comes to both marketing and design, providing the potential players with something they recognise and instantly understand. That money earned can be ploughed into the development of the next entry in the series, and thus the cycle continues. *Far Cry Primal* is the latest attempt by a major publisher to alter course and challenge the expectations of its player base, straying from the modern military backdrops the series is known for, instead focusing on life as it was 12,000 years ago. With animals to tame and command, vast open areas devoid of fortified bases and towns and a sharp focus on engaging with the natural world instead of technology, *Primal*, on the surface, comes across as atypical for the *Far Cry* course.

However, dig a little deeper, talk to the people behind the scenes and start thinking about *Primal* in relation to other recent games from Ubisoft Montreal and that separation from the series' core looks less stark. While an evolution is certainly occurring here, despite the move to the past, it would be wrong to suggest that this upcoming entry in what is now one of gaming's most venerable and recognised series is a departure from those elements that have so far brought such acclaim. Animals, for instance, have for a long while now been a central thread of *Far Cry*'s desire to provide complex, emergent gameplay systems. Systems that push the player into a reaction, as opposed to simply waiting for the player to pull on them to create that relationship between cause and effect that is so vital to this kind of open-world experience.

We recently spoke with *Primal*'s game director, Thomas Simon, who explained that, indeed, exploring further the impact animals can have on player behaviour felt like a »



EYE IN THE SKY

Animals aren't just for hunting and killing

■ Aside from those animals that move on foot, you also have access to an owl that acts like a surveillance drone. By taking direct control of its flight, you can tag enemies and add their movements to your mini-map; highlighting them in a way similar to that seen in other *Far Cry* releases. The owl can also be used to kill enemies by instructing it to dive in and claw/peck a target to death. After an attack, the owl cannot be called back into service for a short period of time, the idea being that cool-down period prevents the bird becoming a shortcut to easy success and progress.

» sensible evolution given the chosen setting and time period. "*Far Cry* has really rich gameplay systems and there are different aspects to them that we can explore", Simon explains when asked about whether or not your ability to tame and command animals in *Primal* felt like the logical next step for the franchise.

"We decided to develop the animals and your relationship with them – trying not to make them all simply be your enemies, but also allow you to bring them over to your side and see them interact with the world [from a new perspective]. Animals have been a part of *Far Cry* games for a long time and they're a really iconic part of it, but I don't think that what we're doing is necessary the next step in that regard. However, it was certainly one of the possible steps we could have taken."

Given the time period and the prevalence of the natural world over urban life, though, Simon does acknowledge that focusing on your interaction with animals, and their interactions with each other, felt like "a natural step" among the possible routes he and his team could have taken. The first goal in enhancing those interactions centres around making sure the player can accurately read the intentions and results of animal behaviour. Without this improved level of communication from game to player, it would be difficult to appreciate what is possible to achieve from the enhanced design.

"We started by exploring the hunting aspect," continues Simon, "and reinforcing the reactions of animals to make sure that the players could read them, understand them and, at a basic level, see whether you were looking at prey or predator. That helps develop a contrast to what's going on and allows for more situations for the player to develop their skills when it comes to dealing with the animals."





■ *Primal's* vision of the Stone Age is based on our knowledge of the period, although artistic license has been taken in order to retain elements that have become *Far Cry* traditions.

"We have reinforced the reactions of animals to make sure that the players can read them"

While *Primal* features far more animal interactions than *Far Cry* has seen up until now, the desire to enhance this element is informed by previous outings. The Shangri-La moments in *Far Cry 4*, in which you have partial control over a tiger within a mystical setting that exists in parallel with the 'real' world of the game, helped craft the direction of animal taming and instruction, Simon tells us. Rather than simply copy what was offered in Shangri-La, however, *Primal* sees a far more sophisticated take on the concepts controlling animal actions and mannerisms.

"We wanted to explore further [what we did in *Far Cry 4*]," Simon explains, "having animals hunting each other, but also hunting humans. What we like a lot is that, now you can control an animal, you see a lot of layers to the gameplay that you couldn't see before, so that evolution has come about because of *Primal* being in development. Also, it came down to us wanting to find a way to give players some sort of super weapons, and I think those beasts were the super weapons of 12,000 years ago. By giving them different gameplay capabilities we were able to create different arsenals and that reinforces the tactical freedom that's important to *Far Cry* and the relationship the player has with the series' animals."

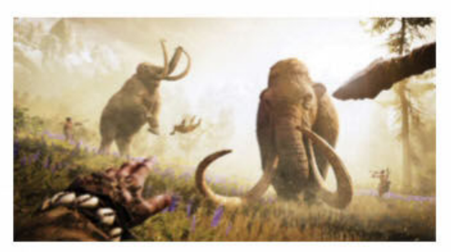
Animals, then, might be more sophisticated and behaviourally diverse than they've ever been in this series, but their design revolves around evolution over revolution. The goal with *Primal*, clearly, is to create an experience that pushes the boundaries and triggers us to rethink what we expect from a franchise that is now over a decade old, but it's not to completely throw out the concepts that have now become synonymous with a *Far Cry* outing. It's not just interactions with, and between, animals that



■ While the narrative is being keep under wraps for the time being, game director Thomas Simon has suggested that the *Far Cry* tradition of incorporating a quirky, powerful antagonist will continue.

BECOMING THE BEASTMASTER

How to tame and use Primal's predators



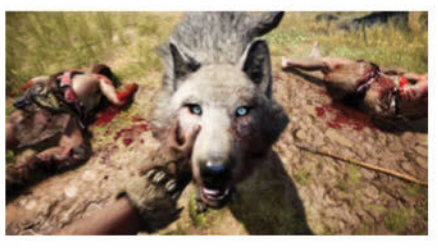
1 Approach with caution

■ The last thing you want to do is scare your targeted beast away before you've had a chance to tame it. Actually, the *last* thing you probably want to do is to give it cause to turn around and attack you back. Move quietly, stay crouched and make sure you aren't threatening it with weapons.



2 A peace offering

■ Pacifying beasts with meat is the best way to both distract them and convince them that you're not a threat. Simply throw the bait in their general direction and it will start happily chewing it down. This provides you with your best opportunity to get close enough to tame it.



3 Pet to tame

■ When up close you need to simply press and hold a button to tame a previously aggressive predator. The idea is that the mechanics of taming should be simple, with the patient approach being the component that takes skill and intelligence. From that point forward, you've got yourself a new, potentially deadly ally.



4 Your new bodyguard

■ One of the ways you can deploy your ally is as a bodyguard, having it walk at your heel and attack any living thing that gets too close to you. When simply travelling through the world, without an immediate goal in mind, this is probably the best way to move as it (somewhat) protects you from unexpected assault.



5 Stealth distraction

■ When trying to clear out an enemy camp, stealth is often the best approach. Sending in your beast in advance is a good way of drawing the attention of the whole camp, giving you space and time to flank around and dispatch the others. Just make sure you call your beast back before it gets killed.



6 Elite hunter

■ Killing enemies is not the only reason to tame an animal; they're also superior hunters. Fast-moving prey such as deer are difficult to bring down unless you're an excellent shot with a bow, but your accompanying wolf/tiger/bear has the speed, skill and stealth to stalk and kill your prey for you.



■ Fire is not only used as a weapon in a close-quarters sense, but you can also set fire to areas of the woods.

have been informed by *Far Cry*'s past history, however. The environment itself follows the same path of progression despite being largely devoid of the fingerprint of humanity and the constructs that come along with that. Made up of calming green tree lines, wide, lazy rivers and dramatic snow-capped mountains, *Primal* offers a particularly rural flavour – far more so than anything offered in *Far Cry 3* or *4*. Still, Simon is adamant that the setting came into focus because it "made sense for a *Far Cry* game", as opposed to being designed in isolation from the wider picture painted by the series.

One of the goals behind *Primal*'s world design is to increase the density of the environment in order to increase those instances in which you can sit back and witness the wildlife engage itself in its digitised edition of the food chain. That much was planned, but not all of the positive results have been so diligently crafted. Many have come about as a result of allowing those quintessentially *Far Cry* principles, of overlapping gameplay systems and genuine player freedom, to take centre stage and be afforded the opportunity to deliver volatile meaning from your actions. "There have been some super cool surprises, which is always a nice side effect of developing games like this," says Simon in response to how *Primal*'s world alters the rules governing those emergent features.

"The fact that you don't have any very noisy weapons, for example, makes you able to have animals get closer to you at all times as you're not scaring them away. That means you see things from them that you wouldn't witness in the same way if you were shooting an AK-47. Also, because you're travelling either on foot or the back of an animal, you're much more immersed and connected to the environment. You're not locked into a box of a vehicle, which also creates noise that scares animals.

> "Far Cry has to be grounded in reality, but we can try to be creative with that reality"

"Everything is part of the same gameplay question, everything is a consequence of something else. That means the world feels closer to you and it allows you to witness much more. So, yeah, the result is a mix of intended design choices and surprises."

For sure, our experience with *Primal* thus far does reveal a world that you feel very much a part of. That lack of technology, while a shock at first, strips away much of the potential distractions and forces you to engage more with the elements going on around you in a bid to progress and take command of your situation. »



■ Conflict between different factions has the potential to deliver narrative in a way that highlights the struggle for colonisation of the wild environment.

» Rather than using a gun to slay an animal, before charging in and skinning it for crafting supplies, you instead find yourself taking an altogether more patient path. That might involve stalking your target and waiting for a predator to arrive and kill it for you, providing the chance to tame a new ally in the process, or quietly observing the scene to identify the weakest target before launching an attack.

Simon is adamant that this kind of thoughtful interaction is the result of the design team approaching the Stone Age setting from a perspective of 'can' over 'can't'. While there might not be much in the way of technology to play with, that doesn't mean the setting is devoid of potentially interesting tools to use and playing styles to engage in.

"We based our ideas around 'What can we have?' rather than 'What do we have to remove?', so our options quickly expanded because of that," elaborates Simon. "When you start digging into what weapons humans were using at the time, and if you start thinking about what kind of *Far Cry* touch you can add to them, you pretty quickly come up with a lot of interesting weapons. We have very different bows, we have bombs, we have traps, throwing knives, poison, fire… so, at the end of the day, it was really exciting to come up with things that we could add that we could justify for the time period."

That '*Far Cry* touch' to the weapons revolves around each offensive option being what Simon refers to as "systemic"; they have to hold the potential to function in all situations at any time the players choose. In other words, any weapons that serve a single, definitive purpose are unsuitable within the context of *Far Cry*'s open world ambitions.

One example of such an adaptable tool is fire, the essential Stone Age phenomenon able to be applied to many of your weapons to give a flaming

club or blazing arrow. The key to fire, though, rests in its ability to set off chain reactions by interacting with many of the other ideas inherent to the setting and the inhabitants within it.

Swinging a flaming club and besting a single enemy works well enough, but if you can set fire to the shrub surrounding a hunting outpost and panic the humans within, and the animals in the nearby area, then you've just raised the bar in terms of potential emergent gameplay. It's so satisfying to sit with glee as you observe your handy work from an overlooking ridge, watching as the danger you've created leads to further exaggeration. Humans struggle to get themselves to safety, top predators lay in wait for vulnerable beings to run their way, panicked and tripping, and the fire continues to spread.

Once the commotion is over, you can stroll in and take what's left of the camp for yourself. Even if nothing survives, at least you've cleared the surroundings of immediate danger.

"...that's why we decided to reinforce the idea of fire, which is really iconic [to the period] and it can also trigger a lot of surprising chain reactions," determines Simon. "It can hurt you if you don't use it carefully, or it can be extremely powerful if you master it.

"It's similar with poison. We wanted to use the poison to allow you to create havoc without being seen, which adds to your ability to approach the game through stealth. The systemic aspect of the game, actually, works into all elements of what you can do – not just your ability to cause damage.

"*Far Cry* is a game that has to be grounded in reality, but we can try to be creative with that reality. That means that, technically, yes, people could have created firebombs, but we don't have definitive proof that they did. So there's a bit of our creative mind behind how that works, just as there is with some of the other weapon concepts. That drives the team on when it comes to *Far Cry* as a whole, not just for *Primal*. I think we've refined it pretty well in *Primal*, though."

The ability to tame and command animals, then, represents just one route to success. If you don't want to



■ It won't just be you and the beasts to contend with; other tribes and shamans will also populate the area.



"Now you can control an animal, you see a lot of layers to the gameplay that you couldn't see before"



■ The *Legend Of The Mammoth* DLC will let you play as one of the mammoths themselves in three extra missions.

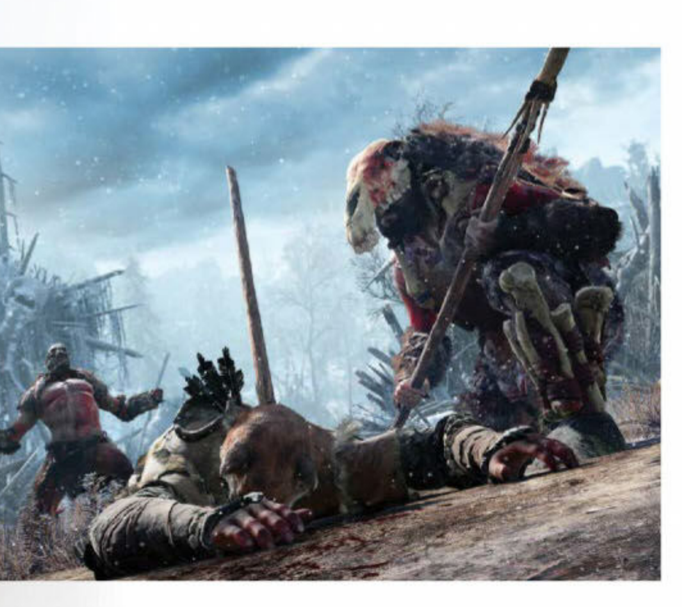
journey down that route, you don't have to – although you can expect your travels to be fraught with immense difficulty if you do detour away from commanding animals. Without the luxury of motor vehicles and mechanised weapons at your disposal, combined with the increase in animal numbers roaming the countryside, travelling on foot alone is genuinely hazardous.

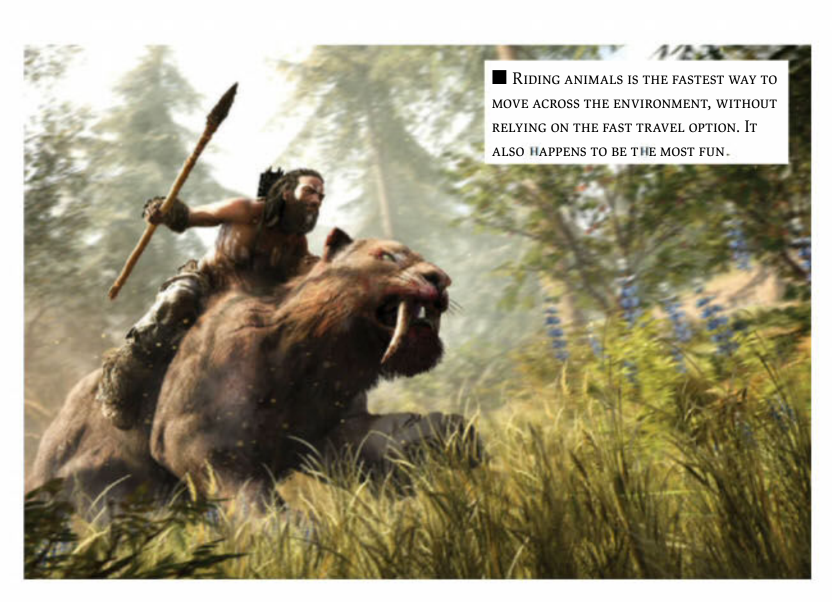
In true *Far Cry* fashion, though, you can opt for the slower, more cerebral approach of stealth, or focus on crafting new items to make yourself the most heavily armed entity the ancient world has ever known. The goal with the beasts, as Simon said, is essentially to make them super weapons, but that doesn't mean they need be mandatory to succeed: "The game can be played with different levels of reliance on beasts. It's really the player's choice. If you decide not to use them then that will have a really big impact on how the game plays for you. Or, if you use them in a way that's not so wise, that will impact your game a lot, too.

"There will also be moments where we make sure that you use different kinds of weapons. Some enemies, for example, are specifically designed to be 'anti-beast' units – so you're going to have to fight alongside your beast to beat them, or use them in a different way entirely to get past them."

The beasts, then, like other weapons included here, adhere to the systemic nature of *Primal* and, in a wider sense, *Far Cry* as a general proposition. They represent just one of the alterations made to situate the game in the Stone Age, but they do not exist in isolation to the core design seen throughout the series as a whole. One of the primary challenges in continuing recognised design choices is to deliver them in such a way that they do not feel derivative or lazy.

There is no better way to convince your audience that both they and you are running out of enthusiasm for a franchise than to simply throw the same concepts at them, in almost exactly the same way as seen in previous releases. Should *Primal* perfectly hit that balance between the recognisable and the innovative then it could be the game that propels *Far Cry* into the next stage of its evolution.





■ Riding animals is the fastest way to move across the environment, without relying on the fast travel option. It also happens to be the most fun.


MARTY MC FLY



TOY STORY

FROM ITS BIRTH WITH THE SKYLANDERS' FRANCHISE TO THE RECENT RELEASE OF LEGO DIMENSIONS, THE TOYS-TO-LIFE GENRE HAS EXPLODED OVER THE LAST FEW YEARS. **gamesTM** EXPLORES THE FUTURE OF THIS INNOVATIVE NEW TECHNOLOGY

You might not know all that much about the toys-to-life genre. For all the money it makes, for all that it's been wildly successful, the genre is – for now at least – the domain of children and the adults paying for their addiction. And while some of you reading this may well be the parent or guardian ensuring that their collection of interactive toys continue to grow, a larger percentage of the gaming audience have never even considered watching a video of gameplay on YouTube, let alone handing over the cash to play these games themselves.

Skylanders was the first, releasing only four years ago with *Spyro's Adventure*. Activision's marketing money made sure it all happened, of course, but the concept would've likely burst onto the scene eventually. In this ever-connected, app-fuelled society – one in which children are becoming incredibly more savvy – it's hardly a surprise to see the toys they play with becoming digitally interactive entities. "When we first thought about bringing toys to life for *Skylanders*," says John Coyne, VP of consumer marketing at Activision, "we wanted to take what kids have always dreamt about and actually make it a reality. Today, the toys-to-life category has grown beyond our wildest expectations and is estimated to be worth $4 billion, of which our brand represents $3 billion. We knew we had something magical, and we're so proud of how *Skylanders* has captured kids' imaginations around the world."

> "We wanted to take what kids have always dreamt about and actually make it a reality"

Skylanders set the template for what to expect from the genre, bundling a starter pack with the game itself, the figures and a base to put them on. This base uses near-field communication (NFC) to transmit data stored within each individual toy into the game, not only activating that particular character and their unique abilities in-game but recalling the settings and statistics that the player has recorded while using them. It's something Nintendo has seen great success with recently with its amiibos, collectable figures that diehard fans love to display proudly but ones that can also be activated within certain games. "We really pride ourselves in the quality and design of our toys," states Coyne, "and actually being able to bring toy vehicles to life was an exciting new opportunity for us. Although the toys are primarily created to be played with, both in-game and out, our fans actually appreciate the individual features and quirks of the *Skylanders* characters, so they make fantastic collectibles."

Skylanders was an instant success, tapping into the modern child's love of toys while enabling their imagination through digital worlds. It was no surprise, then, when Disney wanted a cut of the action, releasing the first version of *Disney Infinity* in 2013. "I think to get one of these types of »

Though the majority of Skylanders from older games work in newer ones, each new release still adds additional figures to collect.

experiences off the ground takes a significant investment," says John Vignocchi, VP of production at Disney, "and a significant amount of resources and know-how to execute on." Vignocchi adds that Disney was "uniquely positioned to be there relatively quickly after the launch of *Skylanders*", suggesting that the company's existing infrastructure meant it had the tools already at its disposal to compete. "We have a consumer product division that has some of the best in the world at making toys," he says, "we have an incredible software development studio called Avalanche in Salt Lake City that has made fun and compelling software over the years. And of course let's not forget we have the most treasured and iconic franchises in the world."

There's no doubting that Disney had an advantage: a raft of recognisable characters that children already knew, an easy leverage to get *Disney Infinity* into the hearts and minds of children quickly. At first it was Disney and Pixar, capitalising on the films and cartoons that were already integral to practically every child's life. Then, in 2014, it released *Marvel Super Heroes*, introducing Spider-man, Iron Man, Captain America – and many others – into the mix. This year the company finalised what Vignocchi calls the "introduction of the *Disney Infinity* brand" with the *Star Wars* playset, just in time for the release of the first *Star Wars* film for a decade. "It definitely took a lot of explanation to people," says Vignocchi of the initial development process of the game, "especially for people who aren't necessarily familiar with videogames and videogaming."

Then there's the recent *LEGO Dimensions*, the third in the triumvirate of toys-to-life franchises. "The cool thing about the games industry is that new things are always being tried and new experiences created," says Mark Warburton, associate producer at TT Games. "Every so often one really takes hold and changes the way that we traditionally play games. The best ideas are usually the ones where you go 'how has nobody ever thought of this before'." But what is it about this genre that makes it suddenly so pervasive? What is it that kids prefer over traditional toys or videogames? "I think that there is something inherently appealing in having a physical avatar that you can play with and carry around with you," claims Warburton. "We have all created and customised countless characters in games over the years but now we actually have it in front of us and it becomes tangible and real. It gives a real sense of ownership and a connection to the character as you pass through these game worlds."



Aside from Spyro, all of the Skylanders are original creations. And since the first release the purple dragon has had less of a significance for the game.



" Your imagination isn't governed by rules so why should the game be? "



There's nothing insignificant about any of these three franchises either, both in terms of the money they make and the brands that they utilise. *LEGO Dimensions*, for example, combines characters from *the LEGO Movie*, LEGO Chima and Ninjago with iconic names from *The Lord Of The Rings*, DC Comics, *The Simpsons* and even films like *Back To The Future* and *Jurassic World*. Its breadth is vast, and there's scope for future content from theatrical releases feeding directly back into playsets for *LEGO Dimensions*. It's a cynical system, for sure, but then that's always been the nature of the toy industry. It's also an industry that often falls foul of fads, too; could the toys-to-life genre suffer the same fate for the games industry? "With competitors coming into the marketplace our focus remains on delivering the best experience in the toys-to-life category with *Skylanders*," says Coyne, "because that is what matters most to our fans. Our franchise is going from strength to strength and we have so much more to come – as long as we continue to innovate and excite our fans, we believe we're here to stay."

This is all well and good, but what about the *games* themselves? Videogames' most negative critics might often dismissively refer to the hobby as mere 'toys', but this is perhaps the first situation where this is objectively true. So does the process of development have to differ as a result, or is it largely the same? "Our games have always been extensions of your toy box at home so this was a natural progression," says Warburton of the process



The *Skylanders* franchise in particular has continued to innovate, introducing vehicles, swappable bodies, etc, in various iterations.







of developing *LEGO Dimensions*. "We wanted it to be just like playing with your own LEGO. No rules to tell you who to use or when you are allowed use them. Your imagination isn't governed by rules so why should the game be?" For Activision it's the toys that are core to the development experience, creating a symbiotic system whereby being creative with the toys themselves brings enhancements to the game, too. "With a toys-to-life game the physical toy is very much at the heart of the innovation," says Coyne. "For example, with *Trap Team*, the trap is what led the primary innovation in that game. And in *Swap Force*, the toys had to be built to be swappable both in-game and out. The development teams put a great deal of effort and creativity into the toys, the innovation and how the innovation adds to the gameplay experience."

Disney instead utilises its powerhouse franchises to drive the gameplay from iteration to iteration. Vignocchi offers us an example with the addition of *Star Wars* in *Disney Infinity 3.0*: in bringing on Ninja Theory it wanted to make use of the developer's experience with the likes of *Heavenly Sword*, *Enslaved* and *DmC: Devil May Cry* to improve the game's melee combat… but only with the prequel trilogy. "The team at Studio Gobo – who is comprised primarily of former employees of Black Rock – had a lot of experience working with vehicles and vehicle physics and handling, and so we gave them the *Rise Against The Empire* playset – which was based on the classic trilogy." Disney decided to do this, explains Vignocchi, "because those characters don't use lightsabers nearly as much as the characters from the prequel trilogy did," adding that "the likes of the Millennium Falcon, the X-Wing and the Death Star are just as iconic as the characters themselves from the classic trilogy."

Implementing these changes and maintaining interest is not an easy task, however. It's a business model that relies »

TOY TIMELINE

It's amazing how many toys can be released in only four years…

OCTOBER 2011 SKYLANDERS: SPYRO'S ADVENTURE

The game that popularised toys-to-life, introducing 32 characters and selling three times as many as Activision originally predicted.

OCTOBER 2012 SKYLANDERS: GIANTS

The inevitable sequel that brought with it 40 new toys to collect.

AUGUST 2013 DISNEY INFINITY

The first outing for *Disney Infinity* came with 17 famous characters, from Captain Jack Sparrow to The Incredibles.

OCTOBER 2013 DISNEY INFINITY (WAVE 2)

Over the following six months Disney released individual character packs, introducing 12 additional figures.

OCTOBER 2013 SKYLANDERS: SWAP FORCE

Swap Force came with 16 new characters, as well as a feature that allowed players to swap the tops and bottoms of certain figures.

SEPTEMBER 2014 DISNEY INFINITY: MARVEL SUPER HEROES

16 extra characters were introduced into *Disney Infinity* from Marvel's huge roster of popular superheroes.

OCTOBER 2014 SKYLANDERS: TRAP TEAM

A huge roster was added to the total here with a new portal, 18 Trap Masters, 18 new Skylanders, 16 mini Skylanders, five newly reposed figures and eight deluxe Eon's Elite figures.

NOVEMBER 2014 MARVEL SUPER HEROES (WAVE 2)

Another set of eight Disney characters were released as individual character packs.

JANUARY 2015 MARVEL SUPER HEROES (WAVE 3)

Over the following three months Disney added six more figures to the total.

AUGUST 2015 DISNEY INFINITY 3.0

The third game introduced *Star Wars*, with 25 new toys across *Star Wars* and Disney titles.

SEPTEMBER 2015 LEGO DIMENSIONS

A total of 54 minifigures, vehicles and gadgets were released alongside the launch of LEGO's first entry into the toys-to-life genre.

SEPTEMBER 2015 SKYLANDERS: SUPERCHARGERS

Along the addition of vehicles into the game came 20 new toys to collect.

NOVEMBER 2015 DISNEY INFINITY 3.0 (WAVE 2)

Four more characters are released, two from *Star Wars*, two from Disney films.

NOVEMBER 2015 LEGO DIMENSIONS (WAVE 2)

With numerous additional sets already announced and scheduled for release, the second wave of *LEGO Dimensions* brought with it 14 new models and gadgets.

DECEMBER 2015 THE FORCE AWAKENS

A playset devoted to *The Force Awakens* brings with it four film-specific characters for *Disney Infinity 3.0*.

2016 TBA

With Disney and TT Games already releasing new toys in 2016, it's clear there's going to be no respite. There's nothing on a new *Skylanders* set just yet, but there's no doubt that there will be…



For the most part the Playsets don't let you mix characters, but in the Toy Box mode you can play as whoever you like.

THE PAST, THE PRESENT, THE FUTURE

How the tech makes toys-to-life work

Technically speaking, the first toys-to-life game wasn't actually *Skylanders* but instead augmented-reality card game *Eye Of Judgment*. Sony's PlayStation camera game detected readings on the cards to 'summon' them in-game and, though the technology was incredibly flawed, offered a first glimpse at toys-to-life. Next up was little-known PC game *U.B. Funkeys* from Mattel, a game that utilised something more familiar to what we now know today. Here was a USB Funkey stand (resembling a teddy bear) that allowed you to place smaller Funkeys on top, activating that character in-game. It was poorly executed, however, with an erratic detection system, a very basic online game and little in the way of uptake.

But the concept was there, and it was with *Skylanders* where the toys-to-life genre really found its feet. Utilising near-field communication – the tech you may have in your phone to use it to pay for things – the collectable characters are activated and then used in-game. This not only changes the way they play, but stores data within the figure itself to track stats and upgrades the player might make. The system remains largely unchanged at this point, except with different, novel twists on that core mechanic – such as swapping two halves to change how a Skylander moves.

LEGO Dimensions takes the tech that little bit further, however, detecting one of three potential builds for a figure (using the same LEGO bricks) and changing it in-game. It doesn't detect your own custom build yet, however, but who knows what the technology can do in a few years time?

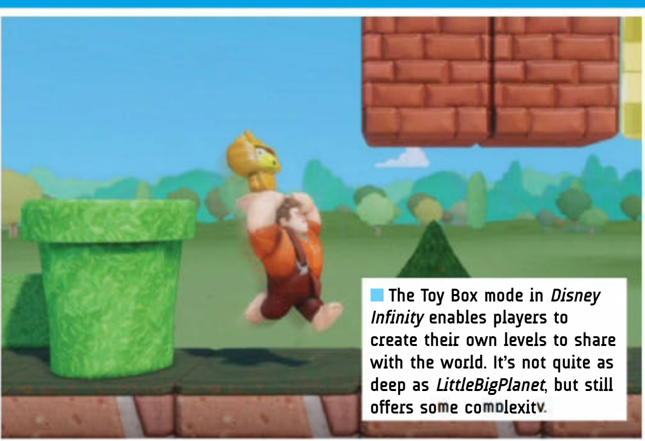
heavily on the interest of children – since the target audience is roughly 6-12 year olds – and that's not necessarily an easy ask. "The trick is to make it fun," says Warburton. "People play games for fun and they play with toys for fun as well. It sounds so simple, but actually taking all of these ingredients and putting them into a coherent game is a tricky prospect. The key is that at TT Games we have some of the best designers in the business who have been doing this for a long, long time. They pour all the experience and childlike glee into making this and hopefully it comes across on screen." This is a sentiment that Activision shares, in fact, adding that it's especially tricky since the characters themselves also need to be appealing, not just the gameplay. "It's important to us that children connect with the characters," claims Coyne, "so designing the characters to ensure that their innate personalities shine through is key. For this reason, we are very careful when creating a character's background, quirks and qualities."

Right now it likely seems as though there's no possible end to this burgeoning genre. Despite the limited number of competitors in the market, there's still a heap of potential options yet to turn into new products for eager kids. Where will the genre be heading, and can the industry really sustain continued growth in such a demanding market? "Innovation is critical to the success of our franchise," says Coyne. "It's what keeps kids guessing and coming back… it drives all of us. The secret to our success has always been this dedication to innovation. For example, this year we decided to bring a whole new category of toys to life with vehicles and this meant adding a lot of varied and interesting gameplay, including racing." Despite this, it's still such a new idea that the traditional way of thinking about toys *and* games – as separate entities – affects a lot of the way these games are bought. As Vignocchi says: "I think that kids understand it much more quickly than parents do. I think that the educational process with parents is the one that takes the longest. I think that a lot of parents don't understand that all of the characters and all of the Toy Box content that we have from *1.0* and *2.0* works with *3.0*."

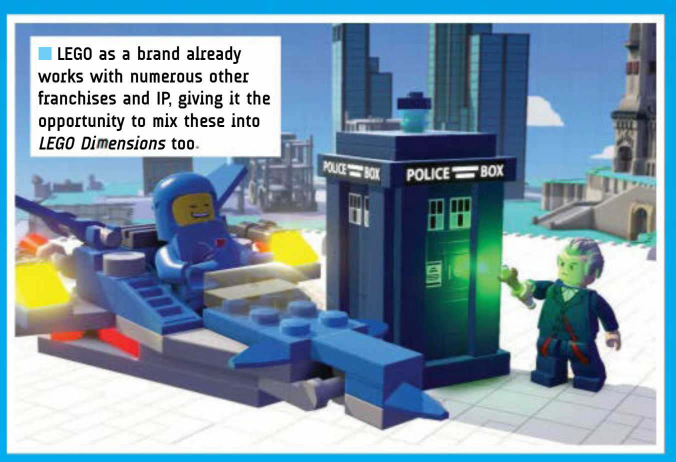
In speaking with the 'big three' of the genre, it's clear that there's equal amounts of uncertainty and optimism. The future is unclear but the growth is continuing at a steady rate; the hard part is figuring out how to make the most of the genre without becoming gimmicky. "It is new and that makes it really exciting," says Warburton, adding that "as developers get more familiar with the new hardware the possibilities will only open up even more." Though the initial startup cost will be a deterrent to so many, it's likely this genre will only continue to grow and grow from here and that – as Warburton says – is where the games themselves will continue to expand. Consider, if you will, a Microsoft-funded toys-to-life system that brought real-world *Minecraft* toys into a digital landscape. Imagine kids crafting items in-game with their very hands, or summoning pet wolves or horses with physical, tangible toys. Imagine







The Toy Box mode in *Disney Infinity* enables players to create their own levels to share with the world. It's not quite as deep as *LittleBigPlanet*, but still offers some complexity.



LEGO as a brand already works with numerous other franchises and IP, giving it the opportunity to mix these into *LEGO Dimensions* too.

“ Companies that have made traditional toys in the past will begin dipping their feet into interactive experiences ”

Sony releasing Sackboy figures that can be customised – in the real world – with a range of objects, clothes and even skin types, translating each change in real-time with the character on-screen. And let's not forget Nintendo, whose amiibos are already creating huge demand among collectors and yet have barely been utilised in a gameplay sense on the Wii U; should we expect to see a greater implementation of these toys with the next Nintendo console?

And that's just it; the toys-to-life market is so new it's hard to predict quite where it will go, and who is likely to show an interest. But what is most significant about the whole genre is not the effect it could have on videogames, but instead the effect is already having on the toy industry. “Truthfully I don't think that toys will ever be the same way that they were when you and I grew up playing with them,” says Vignocchi. “I think that toys – moving forward – will all have some kind of interactive component or be more than just an action figure that you play with. I think that today's consumer and today's parents demands that they be high-quality and multipurpose and multifunctional. And so in that regard I expect that the toys-to-life genre will grow over time.” We're looking in the wrong places, then. The ‘Next Big Thing’ in the genre may well come from an outsider of the industry looking to take on a whole new market. “The toys business is – I think – $32 billion a year and right now,” adds Vignocchi, “this toys-to-life market is much smaller than that. But I think over time as more companies that maybe have made traditional toys in the past begin dipping their feet into the interactive experiences that toys can work with, we'll start seeing the market expand and grow.”



With such a broad range of strong, familiar brands to pick from, *Disney Infinity* has a much easier task selling itself to children

As a particular example, Mattel – who has actually toyed with the concept before – makes an estimated $6 billion a year and has access to products across a number of familiar brands: Hot Wheels and Barbie to name just two, as well as licenses to produce toys for DC Universe, *Sesame Street* and *Dora The Explorer*. It has both the finances and the brands to take over the toys-to-life genre, and that – for gamers – might feel quite threatening. The toys-to-life genre thrives on the concept of collecting all the toys, and that's a kind of holy grail for toy manufacturers. Let's not forget the passion of a typical gamer either, and the collector's edition statues, detailed artbooks and themed Pop Funko vinyl figures that no doubt litter a large percentage of gamers' homes and office spaces. As proven by Nintendo's amiibos, we're easy prey for toy manufacturers; our passion could become the next target.

Despite the cautionary note, it's the innovation of the genre that excites the most. While *Disney Infinity*, *Skylanders* and even *LEGO Dimensions* are still targeted primarily at children, there's potential for so much more in this space. Videogames are empowered by new technologies, after all, and while it might be the younger generation that popularised the genre it'll be the adults that seek out something new to play with.



A New Challenger Approaches

games™ talks to *Street Fighter V*'s Yoshinori Ono about the series that defined fighting games, and how Capcom is approaching its newest series entry in a slightly different way…

Fighting games aren't dying. The genre might have taken a series of hits in recent years – dwindling sales figures mixed with player fatigue at re-releases and DLC malpractice has seen to that – but there's still plenty of life left in the metre of one of gaming's most hardcore genres yet. As the world takes a breath and straps a VR helmet to its widened eyes, a community of grizzled veterans and enthusiastic newcomers crack their knuckles and pick up sticks: there's going to be a fight.

Street Fighter V was developed as a total reset for the series. That's what long-time director of the series Yoshinori Ono told us, anyway – that *Street Fighter V* is aimed at enticing lapsed players that got frustrated with the similar characters and constant paid updates in *Street Fighter IV*. *Street Fighter V* wanted to reset the series' core systems, the character roster, the pace of the fight, everything. It's not releasing in the arcades, but rather opting for straight a home release – a brave and interesting move for a fighting game these days. Testing has instead occurred in a series of online betas, and we've seen balance changes and revisions made to the damage and frame data of attacks in response to these. From its inception to its release, *Street Fighter V* is doing things differently and, according to Ono, that's all part of Capcom's philosophy here.

"I've spoken a lot about how 'reset' is the keyword for *Street Fighter*," Ono explains. "We're incredibly privileged and grateful to have had the support of the community over the course of the



[*SFIV*] era, and thanks to that support, we reached an unprecedented seven years of ongoing development of upgrades to that game. You can imagine how much sleep I've gotten in the past seven years, or, rather, how little!"

Seven years is a long time to keep a game alive – especially a fighting game; a project that requires constant updates, tweaking and community interaction. Aside from the *four* named releases *Street Fighter IV* received, there were constant patches created and applied to a game that spanned five platforms. That's not an easy task – especially when the only funds the game drew in for the last year or so have been via DLC costume packs. Ono wants to keep these constant changes simple in *Street Fighter V*, and to do that, Capcom is scrapping multiple releases of the game – there's only going to be one.

"We're no longer adding words like 'Super' and 'Ultra' and 'Arcade Edition' and 2012 versions to new editions of the game and asking players to buy them," laughs Ono. "By committing to a system of ongoing free updates, we are also showing our desire for the game to run as a long-term service. And in the long term, we will be able to make changes, fix issues and add new content without asking you to go and buy *Super Street Fighter V* or whatever." »

» Ono tells us that this decision was made to foster a 'greater relationship between the developers, players and service as a whole'. Ono and his team knows that this and the next *Tekken* game can really shape how fighting games are received on the newest generation of consoles, and the publishers are doing everything they can to keep the players on-side. To that end, Ono has also made an interesting choice regarding the DLC characters that'll be introduced one-by-one over the coming year: you'll have the chance to unlock them totally for free, by using Fight Money you win from matches.

"We've carefully considered how to run *Street Fighter V* in a long-term, stable fashion, and have looked into how other titles have run similar business models," Ono tells us. "We won't stop fine-tuning the game even once it's released. We've even put a system in place that allows the battle designers to continue to make tweaks, corrections and additions as we hold an ongoing conversation with the players and hear their feedback and opinions." This is something *Mortal Kombat X* has done recently to great effect – the 'backside' of the game engine is built on a series of sliders, meaning the developers can alter damage numbers or active frames easily, making incremental changes and re-balancing an even easier process. We imagine *Street Fighter V*'s systems will work similarly, mostly because both these games are built on Unreal Engine, so we know it can be done.

"It takes time for players to get used to the battle design and we intend to pre-announce major updates to allow for players to give us their feedback, and that in turn lets us factor that feedback into the changes we make. The exact way in which we will implement this system is something that I want to decide based on the ongoing communication we have with the players and the community," says Ono.

This backend programming has also allowed *Street Fighter V* to circumvent an arcade release – the way these games typically get into fighting shape prior to their home console releases. This time, however, location testing be damned – it's players across the world that are testing the game for Ono in a series of betas that have been running since mid 2015. "We wanted to bring *Street Fighter V* to every player around the world at the same time, playable in the same way," replies Ono when we ask him why Capcom opted to skip the arcades this time around. "*Street Fighter IV* had an arcade version, and of course the fighting game community has grown even more since then, so we thought long and hard about an arcade version of *Street Fighter V* – not just me personally, but the company as well. However, there is a realistic limit to the development capacity we have for bringing the game to multiple formats, and that combined with my honest appraisal of the fact that I don't have a solution for making this game work within the culture and business rules of the modern arcade game market, means that we decided to pass on an arcade release."


Vega has changed from a charge-based character to something fancier.

By updating the game in this way, Ono and his team can ensure the pick-up-and-play ideal of *Street Fighter V* remains intact for its entire lifespan, something you can't really say of *Street Fighter IV*. "One of the goals we had for the original *Street Fighter IV* was to allow more casual players to enjoy and take part in the game, and over the years I have to admit that that became increasingly difficult for them as the standard of play got higher and higher. By making "resetting" a key pillar of *Street Fighter V*, our intention is for all players, be they veterans who never stopped playing the series, experienced but lapsed gamers who have taken a break from it, or brand new players, to be able to stand at the same starting line and enjoy fighting together. And so, everything from the fighting gameplay design, command input and even the designs of classic characters, has been part of our purview with this approach."

This reset Ono refers to time and again is visible in everything from the core battle systems (all those fancy

STREET FIGHTER V IN NUMBERS



8,000,000+
Lifetime sales of the Street Fighter IV series

6 new characters will launch in 2016



11 stages will be included at launch

16 characters make up the initial roster

2,000,000
Number of sales Capcom expects from the game during its first fiscal year



Dhalsim's stretchy yoga powers make him a formidable zoner.

We're eager to see how top-tier players manage to work F.A.N.G.

Laura's electrifying grapples make for easy, rewarding combos.

"OUR INTENTION IS FOR ALL PLAYERS TO ENJOY FIGHTING TOGETHER"

new V-Skills and V-Triggers, for example) to the fluctuating character designs: some veterans like Ken are almost unrecognisable with fancy new haircuts and *Tekken*-inspired outfits, whilst newcomers like the Aztec man/beast Necalli are a total deviation from the *Street Fighter* norm. We asked Ono exactly *how* these new characters were conceived – it's a difficult task for any game, but it's especially daunting for *Street Fighter*, with its almost-30 year reputation of interesting character design to live up to.

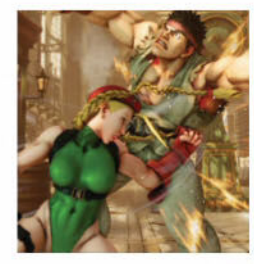
"We approach new character designs from three key angles," he reveals. "First of all, the *Street Fighter* series features cool-looking characters with their own unique style. These are people who don't really exist in the real world but we start off by wondering what it would be like if they really *did* exist. The next angle to approach the design from is the fighting style – after all, *Street Fighter* is first and foremost a 'tool' through which fighting styles are expressed. We look not just at how the fighting style ties in with their look, but also how it fits into the overall battle design of the entire roster. Is it fun to play as this character against the others that already exist? Can you have a fair fight and can you win? The team considers all these things and has many discussions about the direction to take.

"The final aspect is the locality or global region. Rashid, Necalli, Laura and F.A.N.G all have designs which indicate this. For example, there are design clues in the pattern on [F.A.N.G's] clothes that should let you guess where he would be from. »

V FOR VICTORY

Street Fighter V reintroduces the EX gauge from Street Fighter III in lieu of the Ultra meter from IV. But, more interestingly, the game also adds its own way of dealing with other special moves and systems: the V-Gauge

V-Skills



THE RUNDOWN

These are special attacks unique to each fighter – they range from parries to evasive spins, projectile reversals to staggering, quick-fire projectiles. Depending on the character, V-Skills boost the V-Gauge significantly on a successful hit.

ONO'S THOUGHTS

"After 'reset', 'individuality' is our next keyword for the game. The V-system is an essential part of this. Previous titles in the series had systems which would have the same effect no matter which character you chose. This time around, the team explored the individuality of each character in order to give them each a unique style."

V-Reversals



THE RUNDOWN

V-Reversals allow players to use a fully charged section of their V-Gauge to perform a counter-attack whilst being attacked by other players. Even if you end the round with a full V-Gauge, it'll reset before the next round: it always makes sense to use it when you've got it.

ONO'S THOUGHTS

"Our previous gameplay mechanics had the same effect for all characters, so the difference was just in the stats of each character. That meant that it took a lot of time to set and adjust (or correct) the detailed tuning of the rules. It's a big challenge to have something different for each character, but we wanted to hit the big red 'reset' button for this title and this is something brand new. It may end up being even more work than the old system but I think it'll be worth it."

V-Triggers

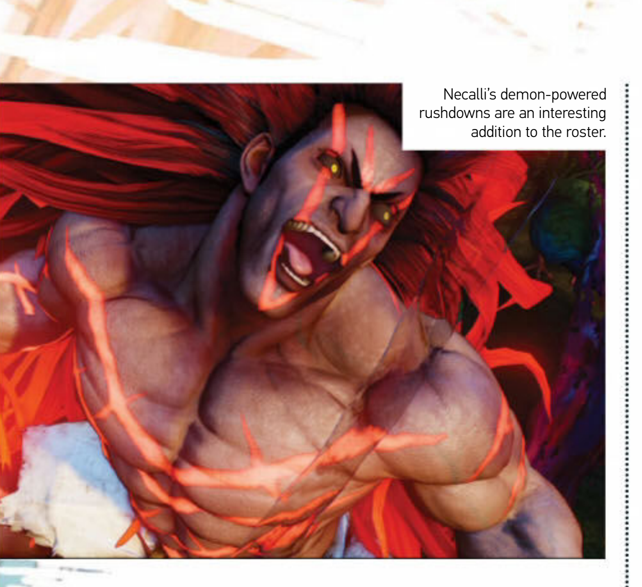


THE RUNDOWN

V-Triggers use the entire V-Gauge and lets the character perform a unique ability that'll impact the way they fight: some characters have extra properties given to their attacks, while others see a general increase in damage output or speed.

ONO'S THOUGHTS

"All of the returning characters were [difficult to work into the V-system]. The new characters are like blank canvases, which made their V-system styles easier to design. With the old characters, their nature and style is something that can differ depending on the individual player's opinion, so the battle designers really struggled with what to implement for each and every one of them."


Necalli's demon-powered rushdowns are an interesting addition to the roster.



» When choosing which region to set a fighter's home as, we consider where in the world there is a new or growing *Street Fighter* community that we would like to represent."

These four new characters are love letters to the fighting fanbase, then, and rightly so – as Necalli is a mascot for South American players, Rasheed represents the Middle-East, Laura fights on behalf of Brazil, while F.A.N.G is more of a mystery, though he does wear traditional Chinese clothing. None of these nationalities are particularly new to *Street Fighter* (Laura is even the older sibling to *Street Fighter III* Ken-alike, Sean), but in 'resetting' the roster and bringing the initial character count down from a massive 44 to a more palatable 16, Ono needed to have new characters represent missing faces (Laura takes over from Blanka, for example).

But choosing the roster doesn't come down to representing various nationalities exclusively – otherwise why would there be *two* Brits in there in the form of Cammy and Birdie? Ono takes us through what the team considers when it's constructing that ever-so-important starting roster, especially off the back of including *Street Fighter*'s most iconic fighters in the game before:

"*Ultra Street Fighter IV* has 44 characters, the largest roster of any *Street Fighter* game. We chose the initial roster for *Street Fighter V*, and in particular the choice of returning characters, based on what we would need to have in place in order to cover all the bases to make this a fun fighting game, or as I like to call it a "tool". We also considered how many characters would need to be included for players to get to grips with the redesigned fighting system. Finally, we wanted to make sure that the players who come to the new game from a place of experience with the series would find the roster of characters easy and fun to comprehend and control."

So, is Ono saying the decision to include the likes of flirty-but-dangerous wrestler R. Mika, the ageing, food-loving Brummie punk Birdie and the sadistic, class warfare-obsessed Karin were just a logical series of choices ending with them in the roster? Not exactly. "For R. Mika I can tell you right now that I basically abused my position of authority to force the team to put my favourite character into *Street Fighter V* (laughs). I had actually wanted her to be in *Street Fighter IV* as one of the wrestler characters, but the game already had all the grapplers it needed so it didn't happen at the time, so I'm really happy she's back in *Street Fighter V*.

"As for the *Alpha* characters, it was partly our intention to appeal to lapsed players who know the game from the PS1 era when the *Alpha* series was current, and partly that we wanted a combination of characters who were left out in the *Street Fighter IV* era and could come back with the reset that's occurring in *SFV*, and those who were active in the pre-*SFIV* games. Another reason for choosing the returning favourites is because in the timeline of the series story, we need them in order to tell the story of M. Bison [Dictator]."

Ah, story. Typically it's the last thing players care about when it comes to fighting games, but as the genre grows and attracts more and more players, story is becoming a key part of the package. By skipping the arcade release, *Street Fighter V* has been able to focus on what the new and returning cast can bring to the table in a narrative context, rather than strictly movesets. *Street Fighter V* will explore M. Bison in a bit more depth, and a lot of the character's arcs revolve around the hulking Shadaloo dictator.

"I ABUSED MY AUTHORITY TO PUT MY FAVOURITE CHARACTER IN SFV"

Ono championed the return of the wrestler R. Mika.

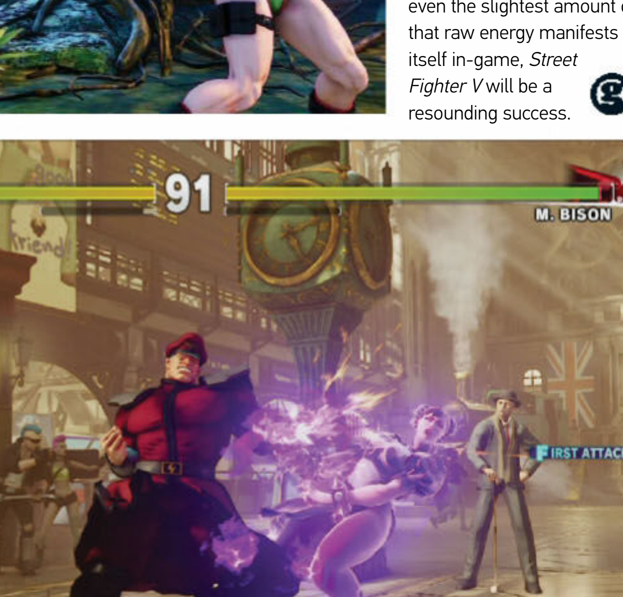

Art styles change, but *Street Fighter*'s humour is consistent.

In terms of story, Rashid, the wind-manipulating, tech-loving gadgeteer is on the search for a missing friend that's been kidnapped by Bison and Shadaloo, while Necalli is a raging fighter hungry for the soul of a worthy opponent (think Soul Edge/Nightmare in *SoulCalibur*). Laura's motives have yet to be determined, but the latest addition to the roster – F.A.N.G. – is a Shadaloo Grand Master (think of the title as something like a CEO Of Evil) and, we assume, aids Bison in his newest quest for world domination.

"You could say that we've had a wide variety of influences and inspirations, from old RPGs and adventure games to fighting games old and new," reveals Ono when we ask him about how the team's approached storytelling for *Street Fighter V*. "And of course, a lot of fans who were asking for a fuller story mode told us to look at the direction *Mortal Kombat* has taken and to learn from that, and we have definitely taken that on board."

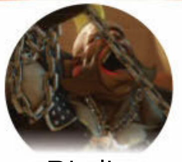
Rumours abound currently that the Story Mode will take you through the various years of *Street Fighter* lore – from Ryu and Ken's training days right into the world of 'old' Bison. And, if the tutorial at the start of the most recent beta is anything to go by, it'll all be rather beautifully illustrated, too, in a manner similar to the *Tekken 4* and *Tekken 5* games.

Street Fighter V now, on the back of *Mortal Kombat X*, proves that fighting games are still relevant, that there's still life in the old beasts yet; just because the games don't appear to change much on the outside from one to the next doesn't mean that they're not different on the inside. Ono's enthusiasm and passion humbled us during our interview with him, and if even the slightest amount of that raw energy manifests itself in-game, *Street Fighter V* will be a resounding success.



'Old' Bison is perhaps our favourite character redesign so far.

CHARACTER PROFILES



Birdie

Nationality: British
Fighting Style: Brawling/wrestling
Suits: Grapplers
Likes: Beer, beef jerky, making money
Dislikes: Children, police



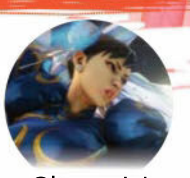
Cammy White

Nationality: British
Fighting Style: Special Forces (Delta Red) Training
Suits: Rushdown
Likes: Cats, Chun-Li
Dislikes: Soup, M. Bison



Charlie Nash

Nationality: American
Fighting Style: Special Forces
Suits: Control
Likes: Justice, Scotch
Dislikes: Injustice, Shadaloo

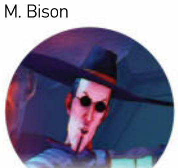


Chun-Li

Nationality: Chinese
Fighting Style: Chinese Martial Arts
Suits: Rushdown
Likes: Western Sweets, Crepes
Dislikes: Crime, Shadaloo

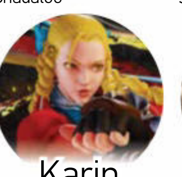
Dhalsim

Nationality: Indian
Fighting Style: Esoteric Yoga
Suits: Zoners
Likes: Meditation, music
Dislikes: Meat, violence



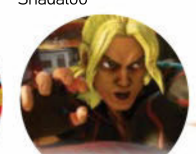
F.A.N.G

Nationality: Unknown
Fighting Style: Chinese Kempo
Suits: Zoners
Likes: Shadaloo
Dislikes: Shadaloo's enemies, antidotes (presumably)



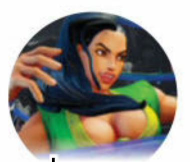
Karin Kanzuki

Nationality: Japanese
Fighting Style: Kanzuki-Ryu
Suits: Rushdown
Likes: Victory
Dislikes: The lower classes



Ken Masters

Nationality: American
Fighting Style: Ansatsuken
Suits: Control
Likes: Pasta, family
Dislikes: Losing fights, soap operas



Laura Matsuda

Nationality: Brazil
Fighting Style: Matsuda Jiu-Jitsu
Suits: Grapplers
Likes: Her brother Sean, meat dishes
Dislikes: Dull colours



M. Bison

Nationality: Unknown
Fighting Style: Psycho Power
Suits: Punish
Likes: Psycho power, world domination
Dislikes: Weak people, incompetence



Necalli

Nationality: Unknown (Central America)
Fighting Style: Violent
Suits: Grapplers
Likes: Strong souls
Dislikes: Animal possession



R. Mika

Nationality: Japanese
Fighting Style: Pro-Wrestling
Suits: Grapplers
Likes: Zangief, training
Dislikes: Rude youngsters



Rashid

Nationality: Middle-Eastern
Fighting Style: Parkour
Suits: Control
Likes: New things, movies, friends
Dislikes: M. Bison



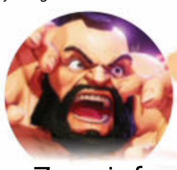
Ryu

Nationality: Japanese
Fighting Style: Ansatsuken
Suits: Punish
Likes: Travelling, nature, food
Dislikes: Materialism, killing



Vega

Nationality: Spanish
Fighting Style: Spanish Ninjitsu
Suits: Control
Likes: Beauty, himself, roses
Dislikes: Ugly things, ugly people, Balrog



Zangief

Nationality: Russian
Fighting Style: Pro Wrestling
Suits: Grapplers
Likes: Wrestling bears
Dislikes: Bears that can't wrestle properly





The Games of 2015

We run down the 25 essential gaming experiences of the year

What makes a game something to be remembered and revered? Is it just the moment-to-moment experience? Is it the influence it goes on to have on the industry? Is it the degree to which it stays in the minds of its players? We like to think it's a combination of all these things. To celebrate what has been a pretty amazing year of gaming we're running down the 25 best titles of 2015, selected and ordered based not just on how much we enjoyed them at the time, but also their broader impact on the industry and beyond. In the years to come, these will be the titles worth remembering.



3 THINGS THAT MADE **BLOODBORNE** UNIQUE

Released: 27 March 2015 **Developer:** From Software **Publisher:** Sony Computer Entertainment **Format:** PS4

1 The World

There's a weaving and meandering intricacy to the world of Yharnam unlike pretty much anything else out there. Certainly, it shares some qualities with the original *Dark Souls*, but there's a significantly different feel and connectivity to this region than we've experienced anywhere else. This sprawling, haunted and twisted metropolis is interconnected in ways that you could hardly comprehend as you enter it. Every nook and cranny of this world has links to some other region and it all binds together in a beguiling and terrifying whole. *Dark Souls* has its horror, grime and repulsive demons, but *Bloodborne* has a gothic romance and dark style that hasn't been matched.



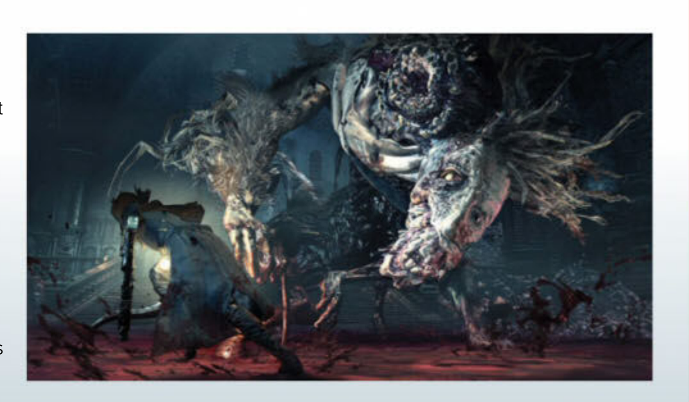


2 The Art Design

Blending in with the overall layout and structure of Yharnam is the way it's all been made to look. Once again we have to draw comparisons with *Dark Souls* and in that game From Software offers a strange assortment of themes and styles for your eyes to feast on and to turn your stomach. *Bloodborne*'s artistic direction is more consistent, but doesn't lack for variety. Central Yharnam, Cathedral Ward, Forsaken Castle Cainhurst and the rest each have their unique elements and a feel that means you need only take a step into them to know you're somewhere new, but it also feels like one consistent world. This place makes sense as a location and as a city that belongs together. It's been changed and darkened, but its heritage is written into the walls. That's great world-building, design and storytelling working together.

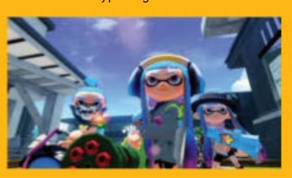
3 The Combat

Some very simple additions to the *Dark Souls* combat template turned *Bloodborne* into something really incredible in the field of battle. First is that ingenious regain system that allows you to claim back health immediately after losing it by striking back quickly. As a reward for bravery and fast action, it epitomises a more dynamic and direct style of gameplay that *Bloodborne* urges you to embrace. This world is full of terrors, but succumbing to fear will only mean a swifter death. Second is the mix of Trick Weapons and Firearms allowing for speedy close range combat, slower ranged combat and a little crowd control with a gun. If you can begin to master mid-attack weapon switching then all the better, but these adjustable and varied tools of warfare make this game a real joy to play.



25 SPLATOON

Nintendo's strange little shooter has quietly been building up a great reputation, attracting a mix of older and younger gamers with its violence-free third-person action. The art style, speed and tactility of the mechanics prove once again that Nintendo will always deliver quality for its big releases, even if it moves into untypical genres.



24 BATMAN: ARKHAM KNIGHT

While mechanically there may have been much about Rocksteady's finale that rubbed people up the wrong way, we'd challenge anyone to offer up a story, voice acting and narrative potency as strong as that of *Batman: Arkham Knight*. The final moments alone made it a riveting piece of entertainment. Let's just not talk about the PC port, okay?



23 UNDERTALE

As an homage to some of the great 8-bit RPGs alone, *Undertale* would already have been a revelation, celebrating great design and NPC interaction. But what elevates it to something so much more engaging is its excellent writing, wit and willingness to cut into the tropes of the genre and celebrate their idiosyncrasies.





SOMA

While on the surface *SOMA* wore its horror roots proudly, there was something much deeper than your typical jump-scaring fare and much more cerebral and thought provoking than even *Alien: Isolation* could wish to be. There's more of a *System Shock* or *Silent Hill* feel to this than we expected and it was a pleasant and surprising discovery.





UNTIL DAWN

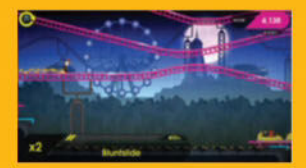
Playing with horror conventions seems to have been a theme of 2015 as Sony's pursuit of interactive fiction attained new heights with this excellent story from Supermassive Games. It leans on groundwork laid out by Quantic Dream, Telltale and self-aware horror like *The Cabin In The Woods*, but we have no complaints.





OLLIOLLI 2: WELCOME TO OLLIWOOD

Bringing a little more insanity to the *OlliOlli* formula paid dividends with the sequel, building on the foundations of the 2D skateboarding phenomenon and delivering something more addictive than ever before. The tight loop of tricks and score-chasing never eases up as you progress from one garish locale to the next.





PES 2016

While post-launch support has left much to be desired, Konami has delivered a stunning piece of football simulation for its latest *Pro Evo* all the same. The on-pitch control is tight, the movement is realistic, tactics have weight and impact on the game, and skill trumps all else. This should be the beginning of a new *PES* dynasty.





DYING LIGHT

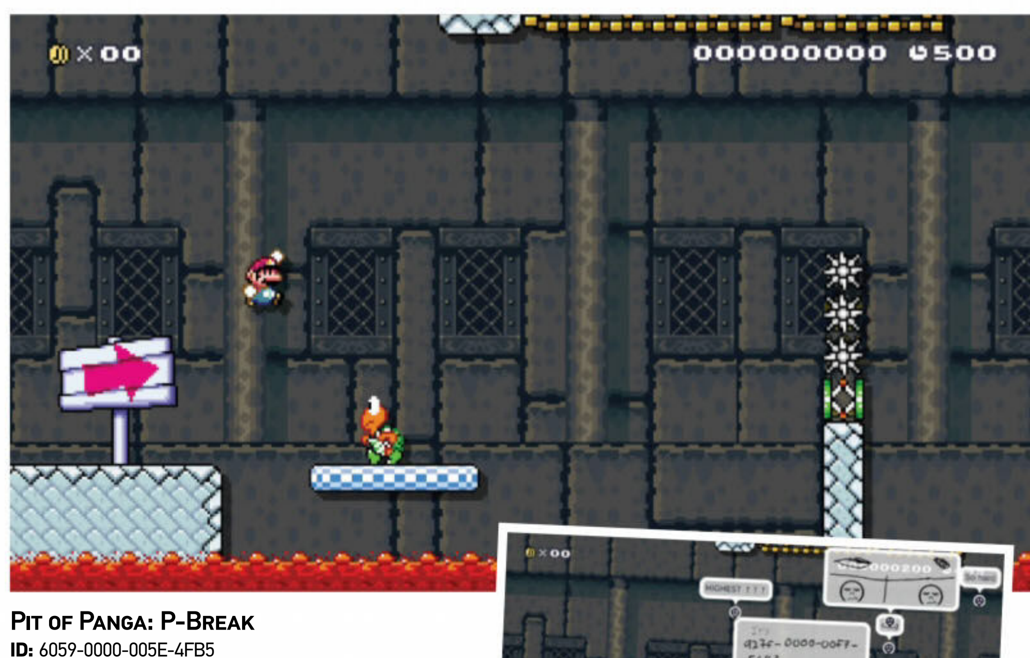
It came out all the way back at the beginning of 2015 but remained on our minds throughout thanks to a great combination of sandbox exploration, day and night mechanics, and excellent parkour implementation. *Dying Light* was a zombie-filled playground that combined the best elements of *Far Cry* and *Dead Rising* into a fun little package.





10 OF THE BEST SUPER MARIO MAKER COMMUNITY LEVELS

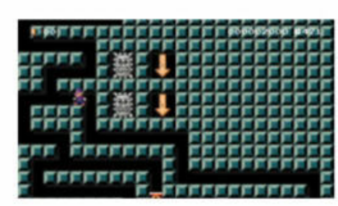
Released: 11 September 2015 **Developer:** Nintendo EAD Group No. 4 **Publisher:** Nintendo **Format:** Wii U



Pit of Panga: P-Break

ID: 6059-0000-005E-4FB5

■ This legendary level is the one that took its own creator about nine hours to complete so that it could be uploaded to Nintendo's network. It demands you to throw enemies and objects with speed and absolute precision as you make your way through a deadly course. We've still not made it farther than the first few jumps.



Waluigi's Unbearable Existence

ID: DAF8-0000-0027-7A46

■ We didn't expect to have to face existential quandaries when playing *Super Mario Maker*, but this level was one of the first to play with messages in its design to torment and confuse the player. In this instance it was about forcing Waluigi to face his inner demons and dark past. It uses a bunch of fun visual tricks too.



Caverns of Zebes: A METROID Maze

ID: 08B1-0000-005B-5917

■ Amiibo support means that a great many classic Nintendo characters can make an appearance in *Super Mario Maker* and inspire levels built around similar mechanics to their original games. Take for instance this tribute to Samus Aran's *Metroid* series, remade with some strange concoction of *Mario* enemies and level elements.



Derek Yu – The Four Hell Towers

ID: BD99-0000-0062-6FC7

■ Another wonderful thing about everyone being able to make their own *Mario* levels is that even experienced and celebrated game makers can have a go and this one designed by the maker of *Spelunky* is one of the best examples. It's devilishly difficult, as you would expect, with an excellent theme structure for each of its challenging towers.



NSMB: Donkey Kong Homage

ID: D8CA-0000-0089-06E9

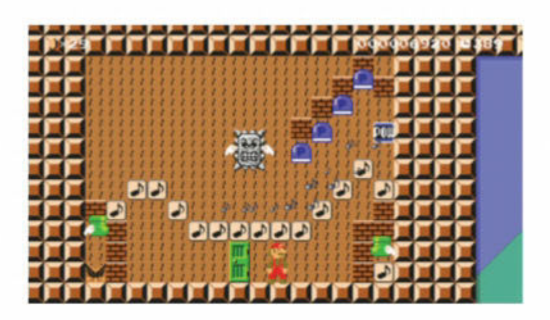
■ Remaking classic games in *Super Mario Maker* isn't always easy, as everything in the game has to map to one of the plumber's titles, but some smart use of his classic items can take you far. This excellent, multi-levelled *Donkey Kong* game for instance uses buzz saws in place of barrels and vines instead of ladders to mimic the gameplay.



Try to Die!

ID: FCC4-0000-00E6-9AAA

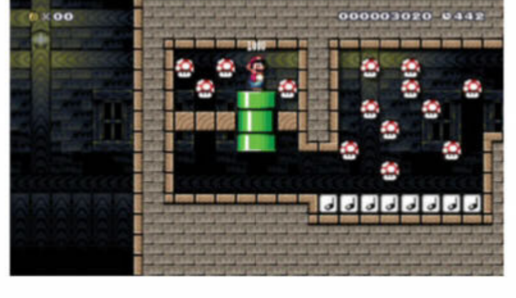
■ We love it when a *Super Mario Maker* designer inverts the logic of playing *Mario* games as the central conceit of their creation. In this instance you pass a checkpoint directly above the end of stage flag as you begin the game, but the only way to reach it again is to die while surrounded by power-ups. It's one of the toughest levels we've played.



Pleasant Town (until Mario came)

ID: 6B6E-0000-0064-8949

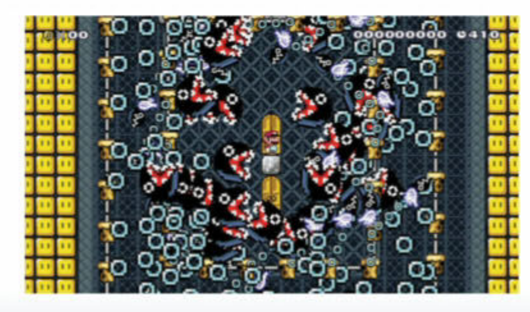
■ This is one of those levels that appears simple enough until you hit a brick wall. There are several houses you need to enter in the correct order to tool Mario up with a fire flower, winged Goomba shoe, and Spiny shell helmet in order to make it through the next two thirds of the stage. Solve the puzzle and you're only just beginning the challenge.



Ghostly Mushroom

ID: 7A48-0000-0052-9CF0

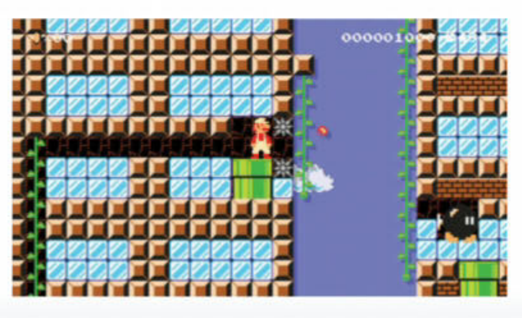
■ With a smart use of pipes and doors, you can create some really elaborate and mind-bending levels with this game. By mapping various areas of this stage to look exactly the same with some subtle changes and with warp pipes that appear to go back and forth, but actually go somewhere new entirely, your hunt for the power-up mushroom becomes creepy fast.



Hard 'n' Short TWSS

ID: 80DA-0000-005D-5FA4

■ How exactly do you escape from a room full of giant chain chomps when there's only one door and about a three-second window of opportunity to find a hidden exit? With nerves of steel is how. This relatively simple, tough to master, but visually mesmerising little level is all about pushing the limits of *Super Mario Maker*'s objects and enemies.



Super Sniper Bros: Aim & Fire

ID: 16E0-0000-00E0-4AF8

■ Playing with conventions again and drawing on the theatre of the mind to fill in the blanks, you must imagine Fire Mario as a sniper, working his way from building to building in order to take out his ultimate target. We never thought we'd see Mario take the place of Agent 47 in a game, but this is incredibly close to that kind of experience.

17 CRYPT OF THE NECRODANCER

Shoe-horning rhythm action mechanics into games can prove to be a disaster, but in a move reminiscent of *Beat Sneak Bandit*, this merging of roguelike dungeon crawling with the time pressure of beat-matching to maintain your combo and stay ahead of the monsters makes for an ingenious and captivating indie game.





16 CITIES: SKYLINES

With *SimCity* fans flocking from every corner of the globe to support and mod *Cities: Skylines*, this urban planning simulation game has seen its reputation grow faster than the towns it lets you create. Spawned from dissatisfaction over EA's last sim effort, *Cities: Skylines* is evidence that if you work with the fans and for the fans, you can achieve great things.



15 N++

If we're talking about formulas that didn't need much enhancing, *N++* comes to mind. Building on the basics of its challenging predecessor that helped usher in a new love for die-and-repeat gameplay last gen, *N++*'s 2,360 levels don't just offer variety, but a gaming mountain to climb that feels incredibly fulfilling with each victory.





14 PILLARS OF ETERNITY

With extraordinarily rewarding combat and an engagingly written story, *Pillars Of Eternity* deserves to be considered one of the best RPGs in recent memory. Its isometric viewpoint and classic mechanics may be a throwback to an earlier RPG era, but its modern approach to the genre dusts off classic elements and gives them new life.



13

GUITAR HERO LIVE

This was so much more than the same game with a new peripheral, which we'll openly admit we feared it could be. The new hardware added a fresh level of engagement, elevating the illusion of rock god status we always enjoyed. And the online streaming service, while potentially pricy, is perfectly designed for modern consumer tastes.





RISE OF THE TOMB RAIDER

Lara's rebooted sequel was a fantastic action game. Sure, the graphics looked great, but more importantly the action and narrative tied together beautifully again, new mechanics added greater weight to Lara's trials and the puzzling was better than ever. Non-Xbox One owners should all be looking forward to this in 2016.





PROJECT CARS

This was a massive year for fan-power and there's no better example than Slightly Mad's *Project CARS*. Crowd-funded and gradually pieced together through community feedback, it proved to be the motor oil the rather clunky racing sim genre desperately needed; plenty of cars, a variety of disciplines and instant access to it all cemented its status.





HER STORY

One of the many things that makes *Her Story* so ingenious is that it's largely a game played in your own head. You're not completing any objectives set by the game itself, you just search and compile footage, piecing a story together. It's almost like a sandbox experience, as you test out the boundaries of what the developer thought you might do.





PROOF GAMING IS GROWING UP WITH LIFE IS STRANGE

Released: 20 October 2015 (complete game) **Developer:** Dontnod Entertainment **Publisher:** Square Enix **Format:** PS4, Xbox One, PS3, Xbox 360, PC

■ It's a sad reality of existence that no matter how much you might want it to be, life isn't a fairytale, and there are frequently no easy answers and simple choices. Of all the situations thrust upon you on a daily basis, regardless of whether you approach them with the purest of intentions – or in Max Caulfield's case, safe in the knowledge that you can always have a second chance – sometimes life is a losing game.

Life Is Strange explores this delicately, powerfully, across its five episodes. In many respects, it's a consistently torturous journey for Max. She's a young college student that's not only struggling to find her place in the world, but also acclimatise to the reality of returning to the homestead after many years away. The last thing she needed was the end of the world and a murder mystery thrust onto her shoulders.

Truth be told, *Life Is Strange* stumbles almost as much as it succeeds. The dialogue can be "hella" disastrous, plot twists lead to perplexing conclusions and many will be left frustrated by the mediocrity of the puzzles. But in spite of these things, *Life Is Strange* somehow emerges as a beautifully haunting, deeply affecting piece of interactive entertainment.

The world building and character development is flawless; a success that effortlessly establishes empathy towards







"'You can't go home again', said Robert Frost, but here I am."

MAX CAULFIELD

its varied cast of hipster misfits and small-town suburban civilians. It's that success that makes the choices and decisions thrust upon you all the more genuine, meaningful and, ultimately, heartbreaking.

That is – partly, at least – because of the relationship the entire game is framed around. It's a challenging relationship; one that Dontnod is able to quietly develop amongst the Twin Peaks inspired chaos unfolding in Arcadia Bay. It explores an aspect of life that no other game has tackled with such conviction: that while people might change, grow and leave you over time, there's always a small piece of your heart that's reserved for those friends that have helped support and define you in your most important and testing times. That's what we get to explore with Max and her interactions with estranged best friend Chloe – and it makes many of the events of *Life Is Strange* even harder to deal with at a very pure, emotional level.

Life Is Strange deals with so many difficult emotions and 'triggering' situations – including suicide, depression, alienation, bullying, gender and addiction – that a stumble in execution could have been disastrous. But Dontnod ensures that every decision made is not only a reflection of the shifting attitudes and feelings of the characters seen through Max's Lomo-worldview-lens, but a reflection of our own convictions and emotions too. Ultimately, *Life Is Strange* hands you the ability to manipulate time for your personal gain, but bravely presents the idea that in life there are no winners or losers, just the friendships and memories you leave behind, and sometimes that's enough.



THE MOST KOJIMA MOMENTS OF METAL GEAR SOLID V THE PHANTOM PAIN

Released: 1 September 2015 **Developer:** Kojima Productions **Publisher:** Konami **Format:** PS4, Xbox One, PS3, Xbox 360, PC

SLEDDING IN A BOX

■ With all the contemplation on the brutality and reality of war, the death, destruction, coercion and horror of it all, it can be easy to forget that *Metal Gear Solid* has always had a great sense of fun. The juxtaposition of those extremes of realism, philosophy and silliness are hallmarks of Hideo Kojima titles and being able to slide down hill in a cardboard box is a great example of the kind of emergent hilarity *The Phantom Pain* supports.





TAKE ON ME IN A HELICOPTER

■ A-ha's classic 80s track is just one example, but really being able to blare any of the music from this game over the speakers of your transport helicopter is a pretty insane and wonderful thing. It does, of course, immediately bring to mind the classic scene from *Apocalypse Now* with *Ride Of The Valkyries* acting as a harbinger of doom, but it's rather undercut by the triumphant vocals and synths of Snake's pop soundtrack. It's really quite wonderful.



MANURE TRAPS

■ D-Horse (or Diamond Horse to use its full name) is your first companion in Afghanistan and a great means of getting around the very large map. But discovering that you can issue manure from its rear end on request is a very important discovery indeed. In some games that would just be a small, inconsequential gag, but Kojima and his team made it into a gameplay mechanic, allowing you to spin out enemy transports who run over the faecal matter.



CHICKEN HAT

■ Was Kojima mocking us or embracing accessibility? We still haven't decided, but the inclusion of the Chicken Hat, an optional wearable offered to you after repeated mission failures that makes you practically invisible to enemies, was a classic piece of Kojima design work; humour mixed with gameplay. While on the surface it appears to be mocking you for your ineptitude, the hat's just so damn funny, we kind of think of it as a treat too. As with most Kojima ideas, it's probably a mix of both.



HE'S IN THE GAME

■ You can actually recruit Hideo Kojima to be a Diamond Dog. His name may have been removed from the box, but his likeness remains, following on from his cameo in *Ground Zeroes*. His love of classic cinema made this likely, of course; Hitchcock famously appeared in his own movies, as does Tarantino, and all you have to do is complete one little VIP side-op to unlock him as a new recruit. We're not sure it gets any more fourth wall-breaking than having the game maker appear in-game.



INVISIBLE, INC

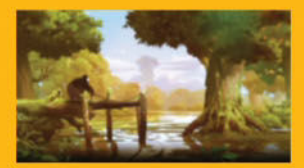
In much the same way *Crypt Of The NecroDancer* added urgency to the roguelike through rhythm action, *Invisible, Inc* brought it to the stealth genre through the power of sprinting, strategy RPG mechanics and misdirection. There's real pace to this game once you hit your stride, but there's also a lot of thrilling procedural chaos too.





ORI AND THE BLIND FOREST

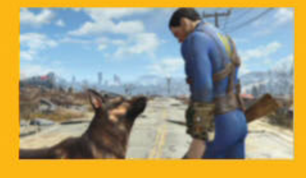
We fell in love with *Ori And The Blind Forest* for its art style, but what made it one of the best games of the year was its perfect execution of metroidvania gameplay mechanics with *Super Meat Boy* levels of finger-busting, mind-melting gameplay. The visuals lull you into a false sense of security as this game brutally punishes you.





FALLOUT 4

There may be something a little formulaic about Bethesda RPGs at this point, but that doesn't stop the formula from being a potent one. The Commonwealth has proven to be another great sandbox of emergent elements and incredible writing, all driven by player-driven choices and character progression through a gripping story.



6 ROCKET LEAGUE

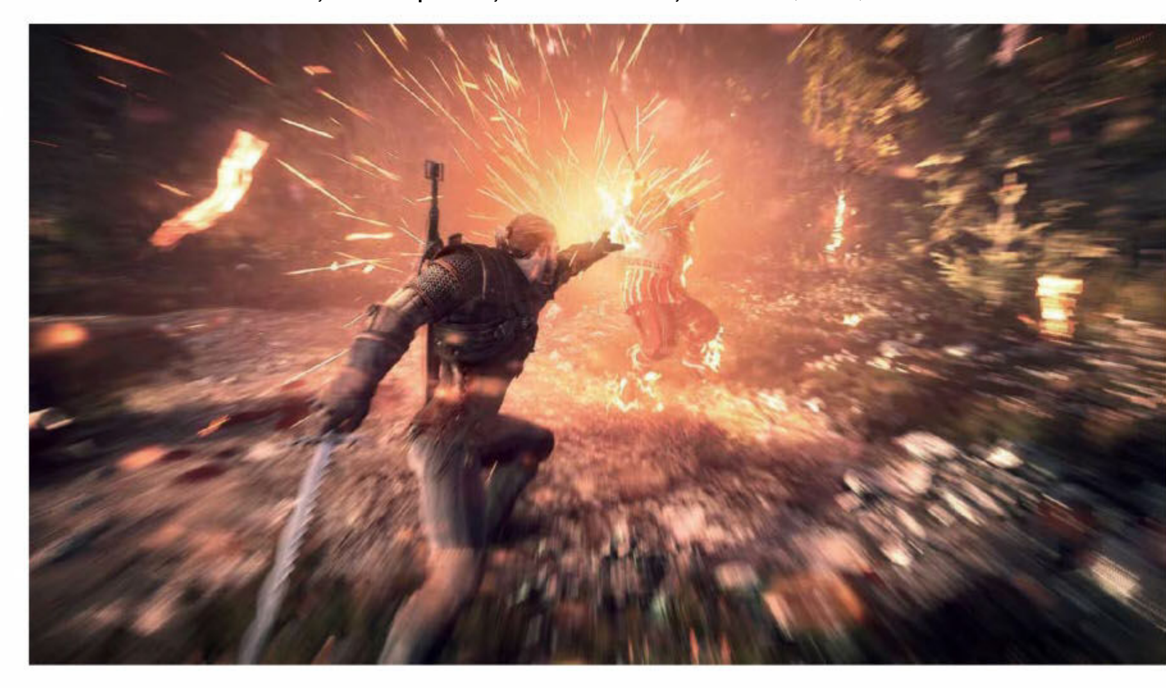
We love games that push boundaries, that set new standards for mature gaming, that redefine the stories a game is 'allowed' to tell. *Rocket League* doesn't do *any* of those things, it's just the purest example we've experienced in a long while of a game being riotous fun. *Rocket League* is multiplayer magic and demands to be played.





CD PROJEKT RED DISCUSSES THE GAME OF THE YEAR, **THE WITCHER III: WILD HUNT**

Released: 19 May 2015 **Developer:** CD Projekt Red **Publisher:** CD Projekt **Format:** PS4, Xbox One, PC



How has it been seeing the response to The Witcher III?

Karolina Stachyra, senior writer: It was many things, but "humbling" is the first word that comes to mind. Pardon the down-to-earth example, but it's a bit like looking in the mirror before a Friday night party – you did your best to look good and then people start telling you that you look smashing. Over and over again! And if you're a humble person it's just so empowering. Deep down inside, you feel this overwhelming satisfaction that every hour spent on coding, designing, painting and writing paid off. There's so many talented people with so many cool ideas in the studio, and it's a personal victory for everyone. Thank you!

■ Karolina Stachyra has been with CD Projekt for over three years, recently taking up the role of senior writer after her contribution to quest and story design on *The Witcher III*.

Did you have a feeling that your DLC plans would resonate heavily with gamers?

KS: We hoped they would! As a studio, we believe that we owe content like that to gamers as a way of saying thanks. Gamers invested their hard-earned cash in our game and we owe them support and a little something extra.

So we researched what gamers could want from a game like ours, planned a healthy mix of quests, modes and items and got to work. We've always emphasised that, if we released something and slapped a price-tag on it, it would have to be huge enough to justify asking money for it. *Hearts Of Stone* required a lot of effort to create – an entirely new story, new characters, new gear. You need to create that, localise into different language versions and so on. This is something we think it's fair to ask money for.

One of the things we loved about *The Witcher III* was that the ending relied more on your smaller interactions and behaviour with other characters than on a boss fight or a binary choice at the end. Could you tell us a little about how you planned and achieved that?

Paweł Sasko, lead quest designer: It all stems from the fact that this is an mature game, crafted for a mature audience, and getting different results on the basis of binary choices has nothing to do with maturity. We love to think that our game resembles real life – and life gives us unexpected choices pretty much all the time. We wanted the game to feel like that, so we had to break a few established design principles to achieve



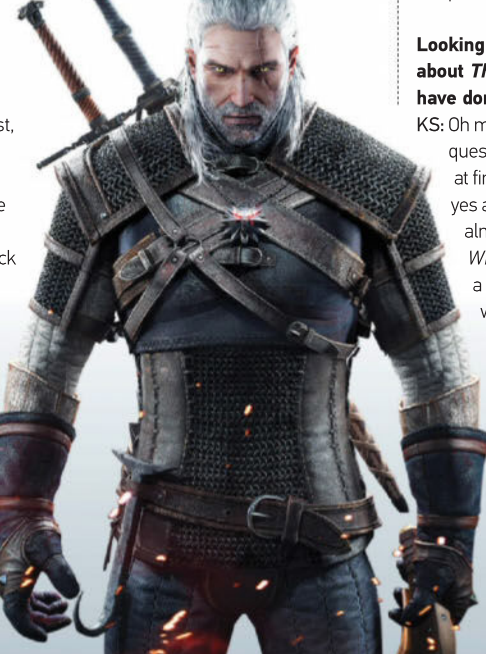
> "We don't want to become a studio that milks their character dry, we're not like that"
>
> **KAROLINA STACHYRA, SENIOR WRITER**

it. That's why the most important choices were not telegraphed to the player and we designed lots of them, small and big ones. In some cases, the player can intuitively feel that a particular choice is leading towards something, but that was done only to give the audience a bit of common ground and sense of familiarity. Also, choices are not based only on things you say in game, but also, what you actually do.

Designing such a behemoth of a story is a huge task and it took us many months to finalise the first draft of all main and side content. Everything was prepared in cooperation with writers, led by Marcin Blacha, our story director, and quest designers. At that stage, we designed all the important choices leading to the biggest branches in the story and started adding lots of small decisions that made everything way more organic.

When quest designers finished the implementation of drafts of each quest, the exhausting process of reviewing content was started. All the leads and Konrad Tomaszkiewicz, the game director for *Wild Hunt*, have been playing the game and offering feedback with the goal of rising quality. During these reviews we carefully checked all of the dialogue in the game and made sure that it all resembled real-life choices.

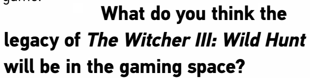
Having built your way up to this open-world experience, does it almost feel like a shame that the Geralt story is over? Would you like to do another story in this universe?
KS: I like to think that good stories have a beginning, a middle and an end. Yes, we love Geralt and we're really attached to the world he lives in, but he deserves some rest. Plus, we don't want to become a studio that milks their character dry, we're not like that. On the flip side, it's not the end yet. In the first half of 2016 we'll be launching *Blood And Wine*, the final expansion to *Wild Hunt* and I can promise you it will be as kick-ass as we can make it, with a new realm to explore and tons of new stuff. But I can't say more at this time.



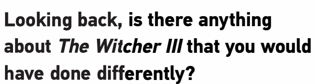
■ CD Projekt Red will now be turning its attention to *Cyberpunk 2077* after the success of Geralt's final adventure.

The Bloody Baron quest, Family Matters, is the one that seems to stick with most players more than any other. Did you have a sense that this thread of the game would have a big impact?
PS: The Family Matters quest is very personal for me because I was the one who designed it, with tremendous input from Karolina Stachyra, who wrote all the dialogues and cutscenes for this quest line. We had both put our hearts into this story and characters, we invested lots of time into polishing it and it's a great reward to hear that people like it.

The Bloody Baron is a symbol of the whole of No Man's Land – a victim of war, broken by alcohol and violence, with a destroyed personal life. Thanks to the fact that we decided to tie up the fate of Ciri with that of the Baron, we had lots of screen time to show him from multiple perspectives. We designed each scene in a way that, step after step, allows the player to learn something new about him, and, usually, it's opposite to what the player has already been told. All this allows gamers to make up their own mind about how they feel about him and I think this level of freedom is something rarely seen in RPGs. Perhaps that's why gamers liked this part of *Wild Hunt* so much.



■ As lead quest designer, Paweł Sasko worked with Karolina Stachyra to create and flesh out the Bloody Baron questline that remains a highlight of the game.

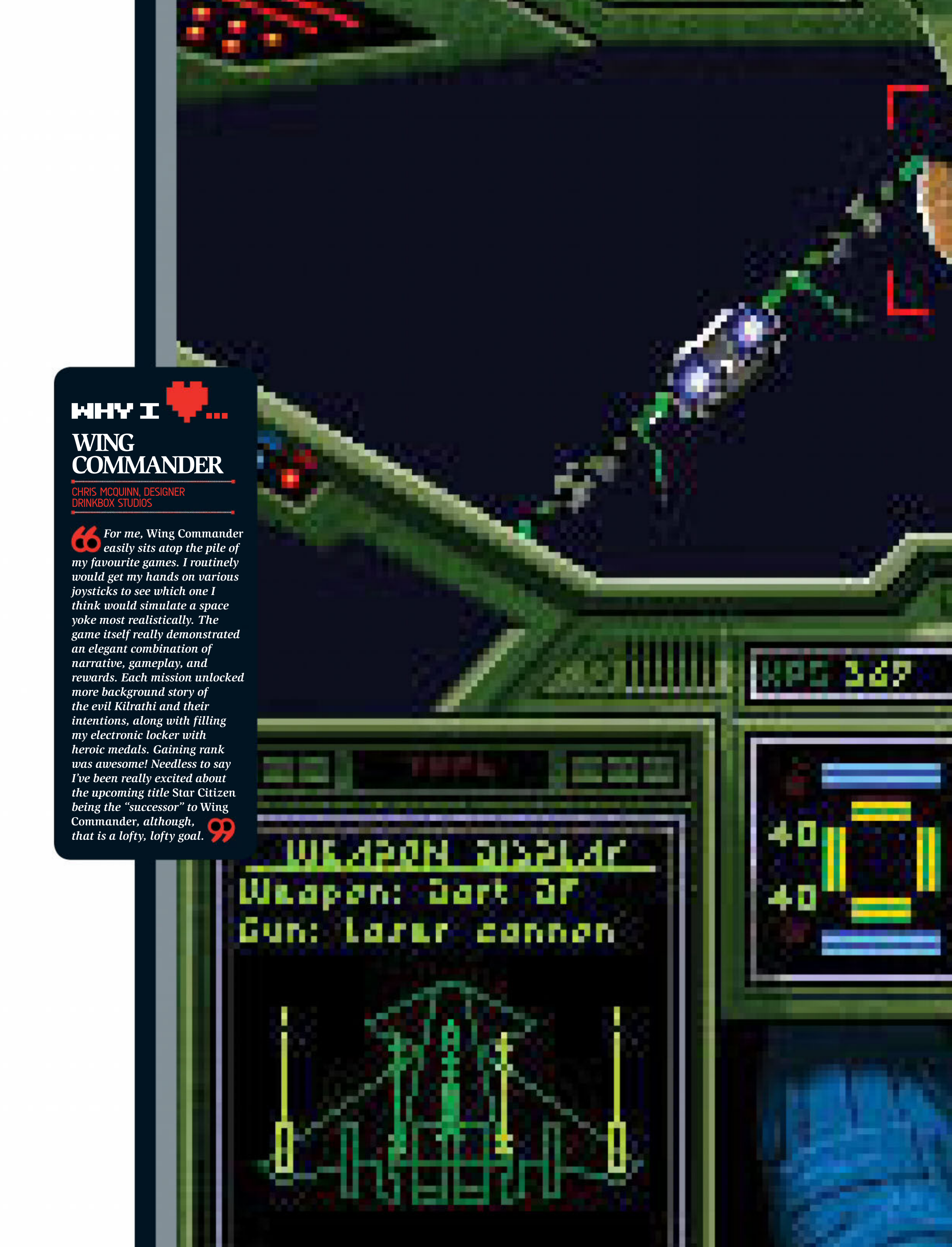


Looking back, is there anything about *The Witcher III* that you would have done differently?
KS: Oh my, this is a complicated question, even if it seems simple at first glance. The answer is both yes and no. Developing games is almost always about time. With *Wild Hunt*, we set off to create a giant open world, inhabited with various peoples, animals and so on. We've never done that before, so we had to learn. Everyone had to adjust their way of doing their job to cater to this new environment we were in. For example, at the top level, writers had to create different "choice and consequence" branches in quests to allow quest designers to incorporate that into lower level gameplay ("talk your way out of something vs. beat everyone up"), level designers had to create points of interest that would be fitting of an open-world game, and the sound teams had to cater for various times of day and weather conditions… And that's only the tip of the iceberg.

My point is, we've spent a lot of time coming up with solutions to make all that work in unison and be fun. Looking back, with the experience we have now, we could have probably done many things twice as fast and invest that extra time into adding even more cool stuff. But that's only theory, you just can't skip some things. However, you'll definitely see that experience in our future games like *Cyberpunk 2077* or even in the upcoming expansion, *Blood And Wine*.

What do you think the legacy of *The Witcher III: Wild Hunt* will be in the gaming space?
KS: I sincerely don't know. Words like "legacy" are better left for gamers and critics to use than for a developer. I'm sure that we'd be proud as creators and artists if other companies adapted our way of looking at things like DRM or mature narratives in games, but this is as far as I'm willing to go. In reality, it's up to the people who play our games to answer that question in a few years. I'm just keeping my fingers crossed that we'll leave a mark.

CD Projekt RED has really raised the bar for open-world games – what do you feel is next for the genre?
KS: Thank you for saying that! We'll do our best to top what we've done in *Wild Hunt*, and there's still much more cool stuff ahead. Any world can be bigger, any dialogue better, any story more captivating. We've gained a ton of experience creating *The Witcher* and we'll use that to deliver something we can be as proud of as we are from *Wild Hunt*.



WHY I ♥...

WING COMMANDER

CHRIS MCQUINN, DESIGNER
DRINKBOX STUDIOS

"For me, Wing Commander *easily sits atop the pile of my favourite games. I routinely would get my hands on various joysticks to see which one I think would simulate a space yoke most realistically. The game itself really demonstrated an elegant combination of narrative, gameplay, and rewards. Each mission unlocked more background story of the evil Kilrathi and their intentions, along with filling my electronic locker with heroic medals. Gaining rank was awesome! Needless to say I've been really excited about the upcoming title* Star Citizen *being the "successor" to* Wing Commander, *although, that is a lofty, lofty goal."*



"The game itself really demonstrated an elegant combination of narrative, gameplay, and rewards"

CHRIS MCQUINN, DESIGNER
DRINKBOX STUDIOS

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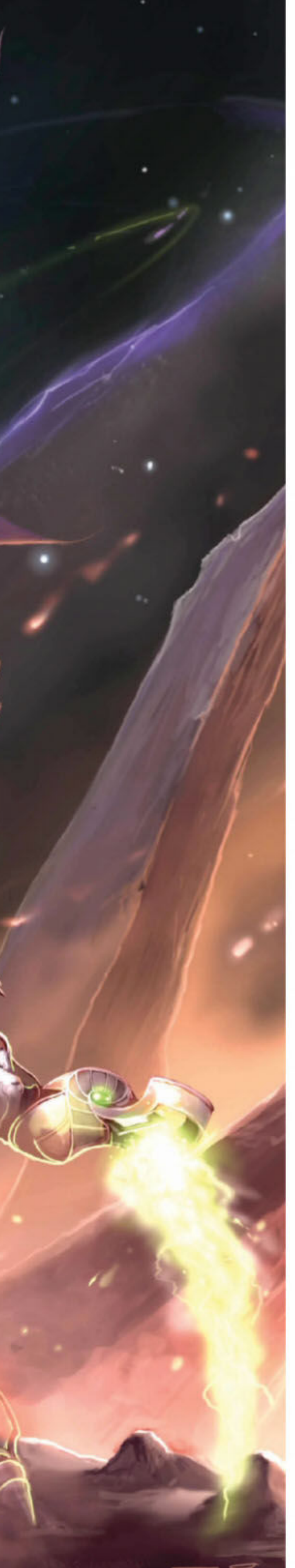
Reviews



86

STARCRAFT II: LEGACY OF THE VOID

Blizzard delivers again with another excellent expansion to its strategy giant



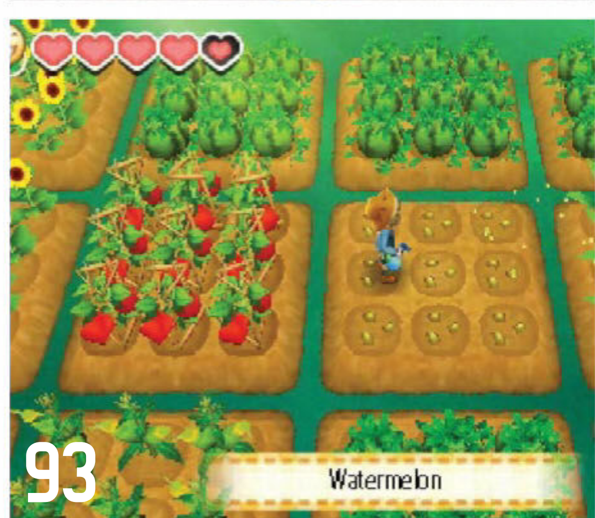
THE AVERAGE

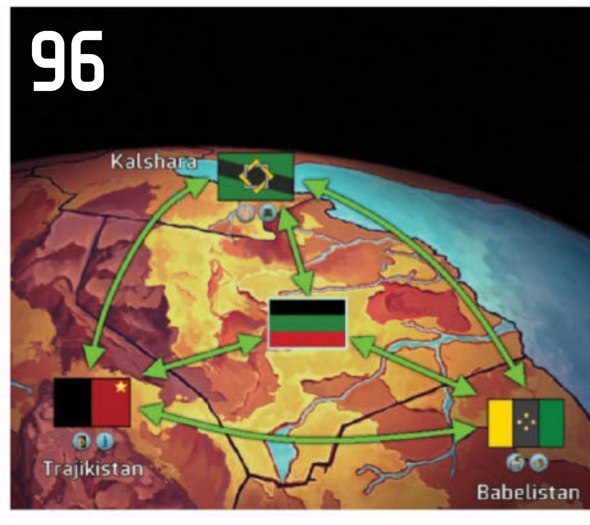
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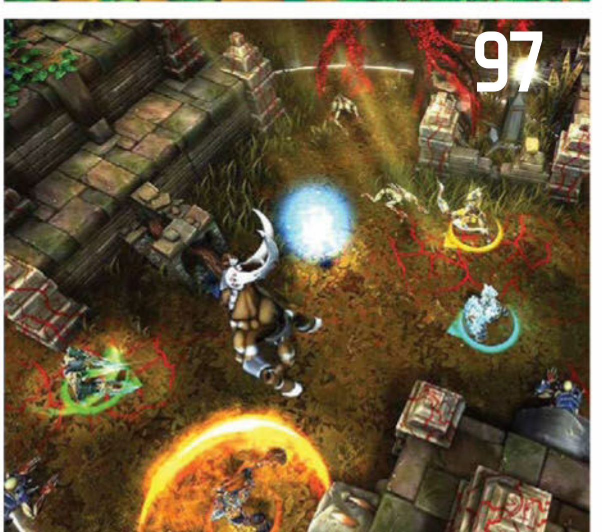












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LONG LIVE THE RTS

StarCraft II: Legacy Of The Void

Above: While this is a standalone expansion, it's well worth playing the previous two instalments to get the most from the campaign.

***StarCraft II: Legacy Of The Void* is quite the accomplishment. It's never wise to expect too much from the final piece to a trilogy, especially one born of a franchise so heavily rooted in the competitive multiplayer scene.** Five years on from *StarCraft II: Wings Of Liberty*, Blizzard could have easily traded off brand appeal alone. The studio could have left casual players on the outside looking in as it continued to further its eSports aspirations, not to mention its pandering to the hardcore fans that exhibit more mouse clicks than sense. And yet, this is no standard standalone expansion; *Legacy Of The Void* is *StarCraft* biting back.

It's actually a little crazy to think how much the gaming landscape has shifted since *Wings Of Liberty* launched in 2010. During those five years, the real-time strategy behemoth has slowly shed its relevance; largely outdone on the Western pro scene by faster and easier to parse MOBA and FPS games. The days of trading on expectation are way behind Blizzard, and so the studio has made a handful of sweeping changes to the core foundations of *StarCraft*. Was it a risky business to tinker with the very foundations that helped establish *StarCraft* as the best RTS game ever made back in 1998? Perhaps, but the resulting experience has made *StarCraft* (and perhaps the genre itself) feel more relevant and aggressively entertaining than it has in a very long time.

That means you'll need to rethink the way you might approach a standard game of *StarCraft II* – no easy feat if you've had your head in the fight for the last five years – but it's a refreshing change of pace. And when we say change of pace, we mean it. *Legacy Of The Void* is more immediate, if not more unforgiving than ever; at least in its early game, as the traditional lot of six workers is upped to 12. Staying ahead of the resource curve can be brutal as new builds and base expansions come into play quicker, not to mention patches of resources running dry far faster than before. There's less room for error, that in itself is a terrifying prospect if you're still struggling to crack the competitive side of *StarCraft II*.

Because, and make no mistake here, *Legacy Of The Void* has no intention of making

DETAILS

FORMAT REVIEWED: PC
OTHER FORMATS: Mac
ORIGIN: USA
PUBLISHER: Blizzard Entertainment
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £24.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-4
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

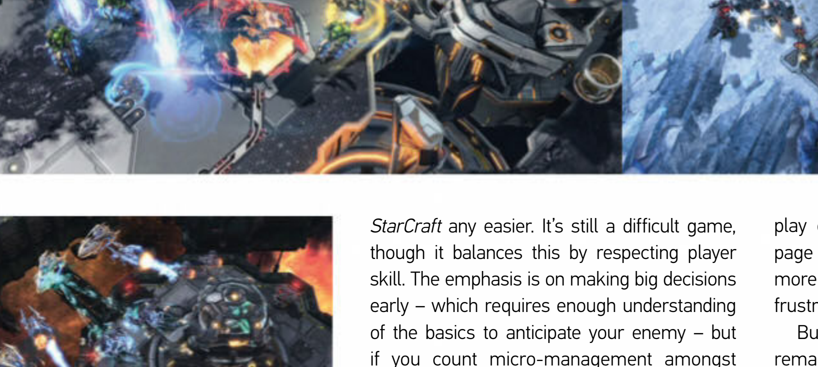
STARCRAFT (AND PERHAPS THE GENRE ITSELF) FEELS MORE RELEVANT AND AGGRESSIVELY ENTERTAINING THAN IT HAS IN A VERY LONG TIME

FAQs

Q. IS THE CAMPAIGN WORTH PLAYING?
In spite of not being the main draw, the single-player is still without question the best campaign to ever grace an RTS.

Q. HOW'S IT HELD UP?
Graphically? The *StarCraft II* engine still looks pretty good considering its age – helped in no small part by Blizzard's incredible art direction.

Q. THE LASTING APPEAL?
As with every *StarCraft* release, if you aren't into the pro competitive scene you might struggle to stay interested in the months to come.



Below: *StarCraft II: Legacy Of The Void* settles it once and for all, *StarCraft* is one of the most demanding skill-based and rewarding games out there. It doesn't get much better than this in the real-time strategy genre.



Right: Despite its age, the *StarCraft II* engine looks great. *Legacy Of The Void* looks stunning on high-end PCs.

Below: *StarCraft II*'s multiplayer is difficult to crack into, but if you've got the time to learn its incredible depth you won't find anything like it.

StarCraft any easier. It's still a difficult game, though it balances this by respecting player skill. The emphasis is on making big decisions early – which requires enough understanding of the basics to anticipate your enemy – but if you count micro-management amongst your greatest personal skills you'll no doubt (eventually) flourish. Fights are faster, games are shorter and the overall execution is far less fiddly than before. Blizzard has streamlined the entire process.

But the truth is there's something for everybody to enjoy here. There are many things *Legacy Of The Void* does to appeal to a wider audience than the hardcore. If you don't care for the high-level competition and delirious ladder plays that came to define the previous expansion, you'll still find plenty to like once the stunning single-player campaign comes to an end.

Co-op has never been a great fit for *StarCraft*, though the missions might steal the show in *Legacy Of The Void*. The mission and map design is as good, if not better than anything on display in the campaign – pushing you and a friend to work in tandem against increasingly interesting set-ups and enemy assaults. Playing as a unique array of heroes provides an interesting twist on the three core races, while the demanding *StarCraft* structure is broken down into entertaining scenarios enough so that casual players are able wrap their heads around the more complex plays.

Co-op also leaks into traditional player versus player multiplayer and, while a fun distraction, Archon Mode doesn't have quite the same long-lasting appeal. It sees you sharing control of a single base, resources and army with a friend, and it's purely chaotic – in the best possible way. It's a strangely social way to play *StarCraft*, a game that has always been inherently lonely and, quite often, isolating to play over the years. If you're on the same page as your buddy it can be a lot of fun, but more often than not it descends into hilarious frustration as any semblance of tactics die.

But as always, competitive multiplayer remains the lifeblood coursing through the veins of *StarCraft*. That's no surprise, *StarCraft* is not only one of the most skill-intensive games ever created, but it's also the one that really established the trend of getting sweaty gamers in stadium chairs all across the world. For those of you that recognise, understand and play the game on this level (or at least aspire to), then *Legacy Of The Void* will feel like something of a new era for the RTS. The balances, the new units and structure will clearly define a new age for the game in the coming years. If you are anxious of diving head first into the time-sink ladder play, *Legacy Of The Void* does offer automated tournament brackets, giving you an opportunity to play competitively without the hurdles, drama and stress often associated with multiplayer.

Legacy Of The Void is of a forgotten era. It's from a time where an expansion means exactly that; an expansion of the core-game that offers a wide variety of experiences and enough changes to keep you involved for years. Blizzard has successfully brought enough to the table to support the notion that you can finally have a lot of fun with *StarCraft*, regardless of how good you are. This generous package will sustain and deepen the competitive side, but *Legacy Of The Void* also does enough not to scare away the casuals once the closing credits role and multiplayer beckons.

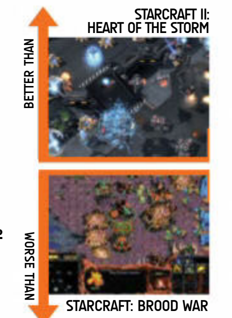
ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

BALANCING ACT: Natural changes to the pace and flow of games in this expansion make *StarCraft* feel faster and more vicious than ever.

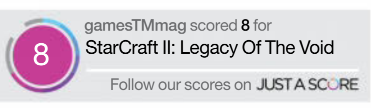
THE END OF THE META GAME

StarCraft II is as epically difficult as ever. *Legacy Of The Void* is the final form of the meta game, with Blizzard essentially releasing its last major balances and units for the foreseeable future. While it's truthfully too early to know how this will affect pro-players, it does feel like *StarCraft* is back to having all three races at a balanced and well-rounded level. Every race also has two new units. Right now, they don't feel like they will have a major part to play in competitive game plans, but as we said, that will be decided in the years to come.





A BEAUTIFULLY CRAFTED END TO STARCRAFT II'S REIGN



FREQ OF THE WEEK

Amplitude

This magazine and *Amplitude* have a long-standing relationship. Some ten years ago, the staff at the time spent every lunch time either locked in multiplayer battles on Harmonix's beat-blasting classic, or joined in arms trying to best its final stages. Eyes watered, heads ached, fingers cramped, but it's safe to say the game significantly contributed to the magazine's history.

What a treat, then, to have Harmonix back doing what it can do better than anyone else on the planet – rhythm action on a controller. *Amplitude*'s 2016 reboot almost didn't happen – a Kickstarter campaign went down to the final minutes, and looked dead and buried at the halfway point. It's clear that this is a game built at a more modest scale than its forebear.

There are no 'popular' songs on its soundtrack, instead we have 30 tracks either composed in-house at Harmonix, or licensed from indie-game composers and a couple of local Boston favourites (yes, Freezepop make the cut). It's an unusual mix, with a few tunes bordering on the awful, and plenty more that need a few listens and plays to get your head around. The bulk of the new songs form the game's campaign; a rather odd 'concept' album that supposedly tells the story of a patient who is undergoing brain surgery, but in truth just acts as an excuse to piece together the game's odd music.

As you progress, the tunes do get a little less experimental and creep, thankfully, into 'banger' territory. This is always where *Amplitude* was going to shine – the endlessly compelling loop of beats, lights and synths that manage to capture the essence of a piece of music as you play through it.

If you've never experienced *Amplitude*, its predecessor *FreQuency*, or even the recent and criminally underrated *Rock Band Blitz*, then the sea of coloured blocks and glowing, twisting tracks are as daunting as a throwback trance night at a dingy local nightclub.

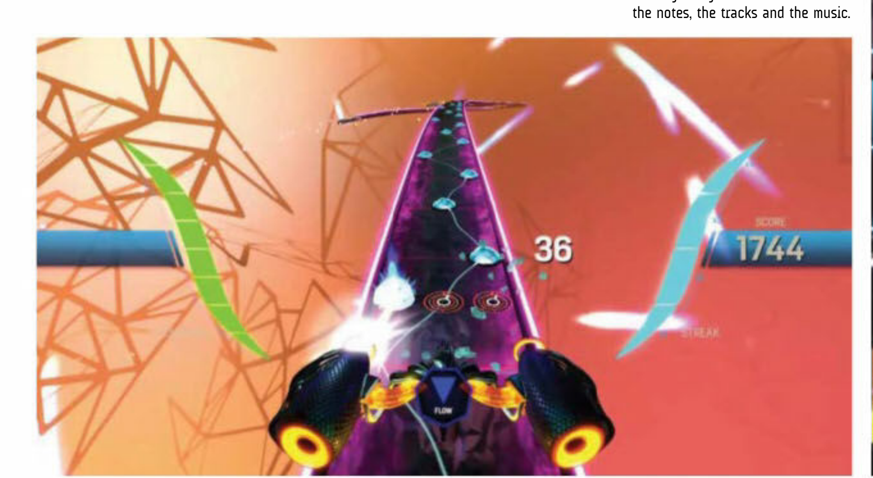
It's actually pretty simple – you control a 'beat blaster', who moves along the tracks, and clears each coloured block in correspondence with the correct shoulder button. Clear two bars on a track, and you move onto the next with a jab of the D-pad. So you might clear a couple of bars of drums, then move onto bass, onto the synths and so on. Combos form when you clear tracks in sequence without making the mistake of leaving any gaps, and you build up a multiplier by not making any errors.

The genesis of *Rock Band* and *Guitar Hero* is clear to see – Harmonix invented this way of representing music in videogame form many years ago (alright, the Boston-based developer didn't invent the genre, but it clearly perfected it), but the pace at which *Amplitude* plays makes it arguably even more compulsive than anything where you're wielding a piece of Mad Catz plastic. Like a classic 2D shooter, your mind connects directly with the action – your fingers become

DETAILS

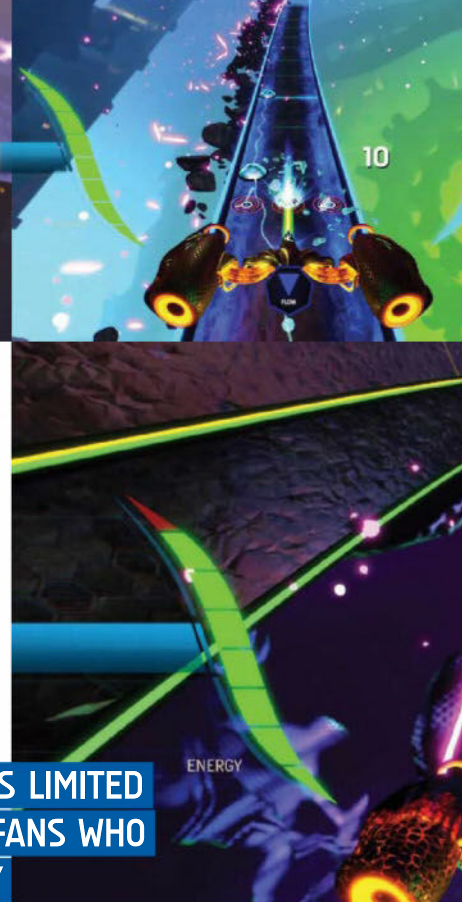
FORMAT: PS4
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Harmonix
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £15.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-4
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

Right: The visuals are fairly basic but the higher resolution makes notes a lot clearer and the action is flawlessly smooth. It's not a game that needs many fancy tricks – it is all about the notes, the tracks and the music.



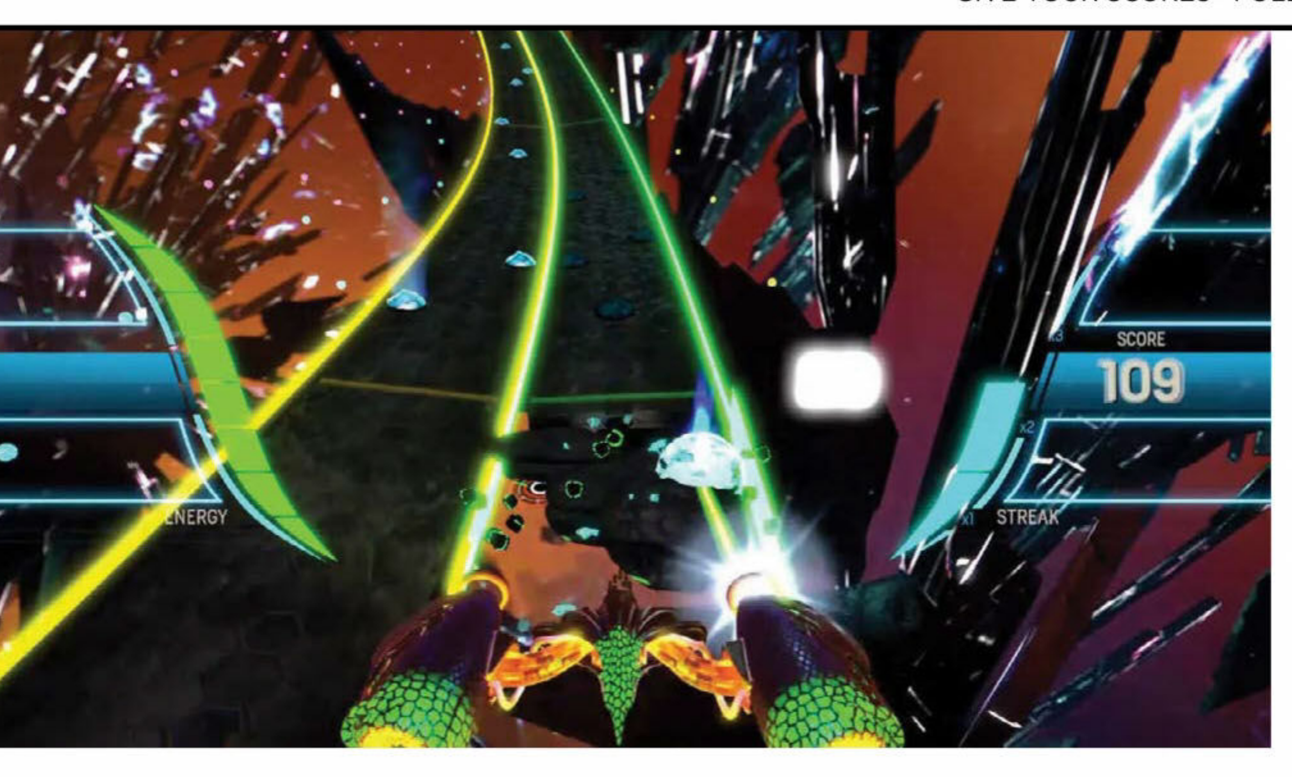
Above: Musically, *Amplitude* is an acquired taste. While the original had a nice mix of pop, rock and electro, this is filled with experimental electronic music and probably won't shift many soundtrack CDs.





Above: Each track gives you a score, and rating out of three. The higher the difficulty, the higher the overall score you can achieve, although leaderboards aren't filtered. Right: Presentation is bare bones, and there is no news about DLC, so the 30 song tracklist might be all we get. Still, considering the game almost never existed, it's hard to complain.

CREDIT TO HARMONIX FOR PUSHING ITS LIMITED BUDGET TO REALLY DELIVER FOR THE FANS WHO SUPPORTED THE PROJECT FINANCIALLY



BETTER THAN

KICK BEAT



WORSE THAN

ROCK BAND BLITZ

FAQs

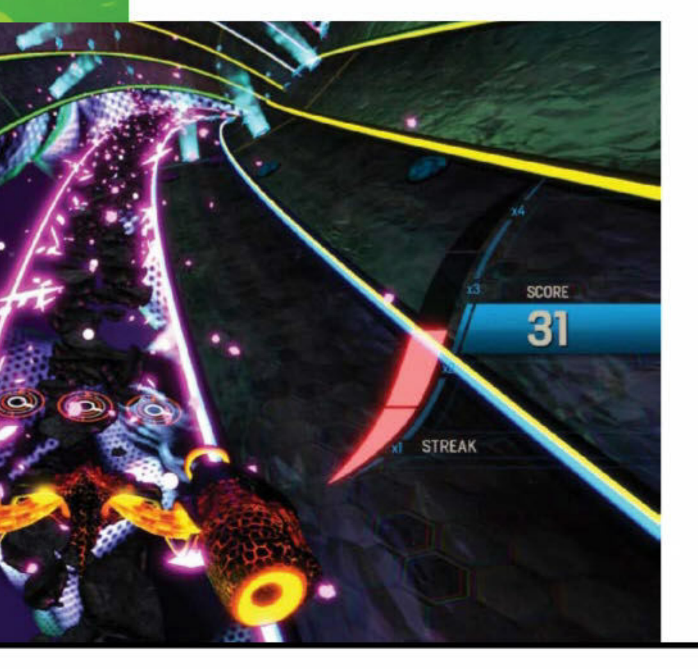
Q. HOW'S THE TRACK LIST?
Esoteric, to say the least. How much do you enjoy electro-jazz?

Q. DOES IT WORK WITH THE TRIGGER?
Surprisingly, yes. The analogue trigger doesn't slow down even the trickiest sequence.

Q. BEST SONG?
A difficult one, but we'll go for *Crypteque* from *Crypt Of The Necrodancer*.

BATTLE JAM

Amplitude's fabled multiplayer makes a return, although only in offline form. You may remember the original game featuring one of the earliest attempts at online multiplayer on console, although it required a hell of a lot of effort and patience to get working (and a home internet connection, less ubiquitous ten-plus years ago of course). Here, up to four players can battle across the track list, firing off power ups to stitch each other up and trying to out point one another. It's absolutely not the game's focus but credit to Harmonix for getting it in there and executing with typical class and skill.



a blur. The second you think about what you're actually doing, it all falls apart.

Or at least, it does on the higher difficulties. *Amplitude* does cater for a newer audience, to those who have never felt the burn of Komputer Kontroller's *Robot Rockerz*, whose fingers aren't twisted into twitching claws, whose eyes still work. On the lower levels, *Amplitude* is actually quite a dull game – the cacophonous music only worsened by the limited interactions on screen. Yet it's a great tutorial – just as a *PES* player must drop the difficulty every year to understand the new nuances on show – so it's worth battling through the campaign on Intermediate mode so you have time to recognise the little tweaks to the formula that make *Amplitude* 2016 something of a smoother experience when compared to the original.

The most immediate change is instant track jumping. In all of Harmonix's beat-blasting games (as we'll call them for convenience), you had to manually skip through the tracks you'd cleared to reach the next one available. Now, one press of the D-pad sends you straight to the next uncleared track. A small change maybe, but one that fundamentally alters how you string together combos, makes high scoring much easier, and makes for a smoother game and a significantly improved sense of flow.

ENHANCED
IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

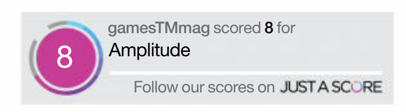
LIGHT PIPE: Highlights on the next suggested note make combos much easier to chain.
SKIP A BEAT: Automatically skipping past completed tracks is an inspired design decision.

This is coupled with little beacons of light that highlight the next note available on an adjacent track. In the original game, these were highlighted with a pulsing green arrow, but this subtle stylistic choice makes it much easier to determine exactly where the next note is, and how to keep your combo going. It's doubly important on the hardest difficulty, which will push your abilities to their absolute limits, perhaps even more so than the original game's legendary final few tracks.

And if you're a true Harmonix-head, you can even activate Freq mode, which wraps all the tracks into a tunnel like the classic *FreQuency*. Unfortunately, as the tracks bend in *Amplitude*, it makes Freq mode a little too unwieldy to play at high difficulty. Still, credit to Harmonix for pushing its budget to really deliver for the fans who supported the project financially.

And that's really the best way to look at *Amplitude*. This is a game for the fans, paid for by the fans, and limited only by its budget. The music won't be to everyone's taste, and of course doesn't include any pop classics, but the precision and excitement of the moment-to-moment musical action has never been stronger. Harmonix is a master developer, and *Amplitude* only cements that legacy.

VERDICT
A WELCOME RETURN OF A CLASSIC



TRULY DIRTY AGAIN... FINALLY

Dirt Rally

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Codemasters
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £33.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: Intel Core i3 / AMD FX Series, 4 GB RAM, NVIDIA GT430 / AMD HD 5450 graphics card, DirectX 11, 35GB free disc space
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

BETTER THAN

DIRT 3





RICHARD BURNS RALLY

WORSE THAN

You'd be forgiven for thinking that the era of the rally simulator was dead. Not since 2004's *Richard Burns Rally* has there been a rally game that has approached the sport with the goal of definitively portraying it as it exists in reality: cars that require significant practise to master, terrain as difficult to memorise as it is to slide across, weather that makes 'white out' literal and opponents that punish even the slightest hesitation.

Dirt Rally does all of these things, and it does them with a flair and elegance that makes it difficult not to immediately come to the conclusion that this, after a few years of lacklustre creations, is Codemasters back to its very best. Certainly, this is the best thing the 'Dirt' name has ever been associated with and rallying enthusiasts are sure to be relieved that the obsession with the kind of American slang that was only partially hip in the 90s has been overcome and removed.

Instead, the focus is on the provision of a rallying essence. While this isn't in the same realism league as *Richard Burns Rally*, it does give you a wonderful sense of what it's like to throw some of the world's most famous rally vehicles around snow, mud and gravel without having to invest in a top-tier racing wheel to simply get off the start line without a hitch.

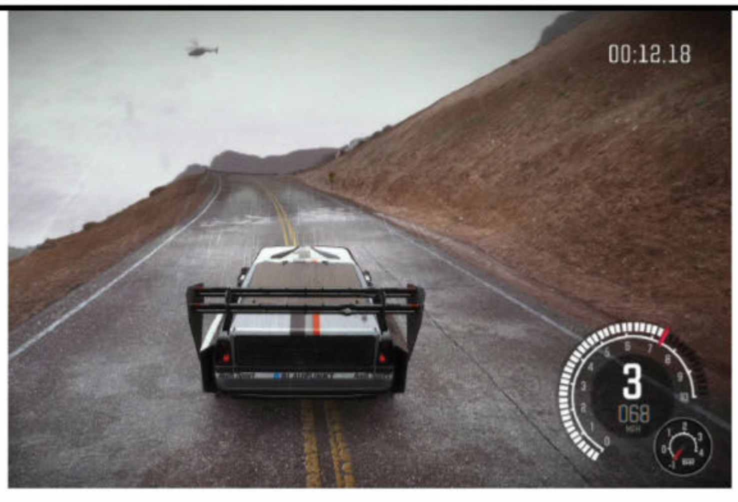
The handling model here can sometimes feel a little light, and it's undeniable that each of the 39 cars have a tendency to share too many similarities but that's easily forgivable in the heat of the moment. An enormous wealth of stages across different countries hosting wildly disparate track conditions centres the challenge on wrestling with corners and crests rather than gearboxes and exhausted brake discs. It's a focus that keeps you guessing as you plough through the in-built career mode, set up custom events or try your hand against players online. Learning a specific vehicle is one thing, with those skills being fairly easily applied to any task, but taming a random combination of surface type, weather and light levels – with the added complexity of differently skilled opponents – is quite another.

Further, the familiarity between cars is sure to be of great assistance to newcomers. Sure, that won't appease hardened veterans, but few genres requiring this level of developer investment can survive on tailoring themselves solely to the elite players. Codemasters deserves to galvanise itself a new audience with *Dirt Rally*.

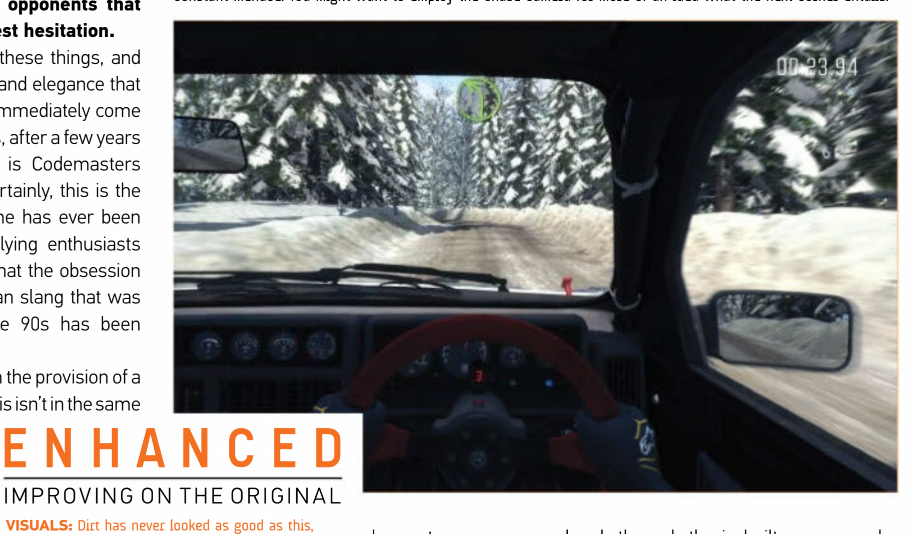
ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

VISUALS: Dirt has never looked as good as this, which is possibly a function of development being focused on the PC edition. Console releases are due April 2016.



Above: Weather conditions can making it tough if you're facing down a stage in which sheer drops are a constant menace. You might want to employ the chase camera for more of an idea what the next corner entails.



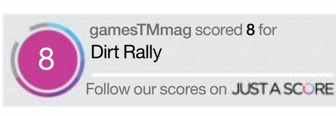


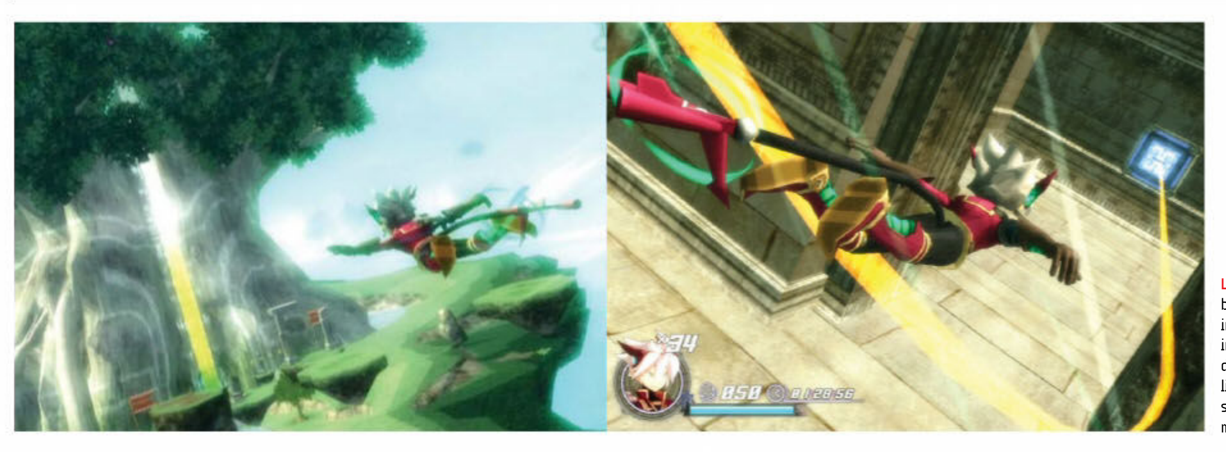


Above: There are few moments offered by racing games that are as evocative as getting behind the wheel of an old Lancia.



A STUNNING RETURN TO DIRT'S ROUTES. TRULY WORTHWHILE.





Left: Rodea can be graceful in flight, but infuriatingly drops to earth like a stone should your flight meter run down.

CRASHING DOWN TO EARTH

Rodea The Sky Soldier

This is an attempt by famed developer Yuji Naka to re-capture the lightning in a bottle that was Saturn classic *Nights Into Dreams.* Unfortunately, his new game has more of the nightmare about it, as Rodea returns to Earth with a bump just as soon as he's taken flight. Perhaps this should be expected of a game that has spent much of its life in development hell. First announced for Wii in 2011, the title has been passed from pillar to post, with Naka losing control along the way. The result is a badly ported Wii U game that has clearly had little thought or love lavished upon it during the porting process.

The best example of this is perhaps the game's controls. Naka's vision was to use the Wiimote to have Rodea glide through the skies. On Wii U, these mechanics have mysteriously vanished, with movement poorly mapped to the Wii U's analogue sticks instead. Even worse, nobody thought to add the option to let players invert the sticks rendering Rodea instantly unplayable for many. We can't avoid mention of the visuals either, which are simply of an unacceptable standard. Textures are bland, character models jagged and environments bereft of interesting features, with the game ugly for a Wii game, let alone a Wii U title.

Those who do persevere will discover a game laden with anime cliché. Rodea himself is a robot blessed, or cursed, with a heart. Then there's the girlish Princess Cecelia he's sworn to protect and, finally, chief villain Emperor Geardo, who can maniacally laugh with the best of them. To defeat Geardo's mechanical forces, Rodea must take to the skies and literally barrel into them. The key to success being the chaining of attacks, so that whole groups of foes can be taken out in a pinball-like frenzy. Theoretically you could make your way across any given stage without returning to land to fill Rodea's flight meter. In practice, the sluggish controls and shoddy camera combine so that chaining attacks is often as much about fighting the analogue sticks as it is your enemies.

Gravitons can be collected to boost the flight meter and extend combos though, again, the controls somewhat limit their effect. . Somewhere buried within *The Sky Soldier* is the kernel of an idea that defies gravity, as well as our expectations. Sadly, despite Naka's best intentions, Rodea never hits those heights.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Wii U
OTHER FORMATS: Wii, 3DS
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: NIS America
DEVELOPER: Kadokawa Games
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN: WAYWARD MANOR (PC)

WORSE THAN: SONIC LOST WORLD (WII U)

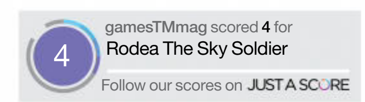
MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

CONFUSING CAMERA: We've not come across a camera that's as cumbersome to control in a long time. This is a game that badly misses the Wiimote controls that were originally intended.

VERDICT

WHEN A SKY SOLDIER FALLS







Above: Expect to explore the usual roster of 3D-platformer environments, from fiery caverns overflowing with lava to frozen arctic tundras.

DOES MORE FARM THAN GOOD

Story Of Seasons

Developer Marvelous AQL has been associated with the *Harvest Moon* series since the Game Boy Advance days. It's now separated from publisher Natsume, which still owns the IP, but be under no illusions: *Story Of Seasons* is still very much a *Harvest Moon* game in all but name.

As ever, players create their character and set up their farm in a sleepy village – in this case Oak Tree Town. Growing crops, raising animals and romancing potential spouses is the order of the day as your farm slowly begins to take shape.

The key word here is undoubtedly 'slowly', as *Story Of Seasons* is a game that requires an immense amount of patience before things start to get going. There are so many different elements to get used to and master – something that should become clear as the 90-minute tutorial trundles on – that tens of hours later you'll still be discovering new things.

Whether this is a good thing depends on your tolerance for what are essentially chores. Much of the early part of the game before your farm really starts to take shape consists of tilling the fields, growing plants, paying attention to your animals and the like, which soon feels repetitive.

Over time though, while these chores remain ever present, they're joined by more enjoyable tasks like the romance system (where you woo one of your six eligible partners and eventually marry them) and discovering precious minerals that can be used to upgrade your farm.

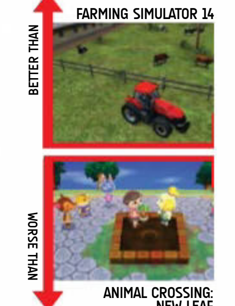
Ultimately though, the game's strength lies in its ability to make the mundane seem oddly compelling. Anyone who got into a daily tree-shaking routine in an *Animal Crossing* game will know this phenomenon well, and it's part of *Story Of Seasons*' foundation. Continually planting crops, selling them to market and milking cows is as repetitive as you'd expect, yet you'll willingly do it anyway because somehow the painfully slow evolution of your farm over time makes it worthwhile.

There are other aspects of the game that can be less easy to forgive, however. The frame rate drops to surprisingly low levels at times, a curious failure in optimisation given how relatively basic the game looks. Multiplayer is also a letdown, with the option to visit friends' farms and view the farm stats of people you StreetPass all that's on offer.

Harvest Moon games have always been an acquired taste and a change of moniker doesn't make things any different this time around. *Story Of Seasons* can be laboriously repetitive at times, but it somehow manages to keep you playing anyway through a combination of charming dialogue and the eventual satisfaction of a farm you've sweated buckets to bring up to scratch.

DETAILS

FORMAT: 3DS
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Nintendo
DEVELOPER: Marvelous AQL
PRICE: £34.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



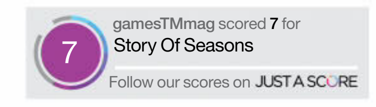
WORLDWIDE
TAKING GAMING ONLINE

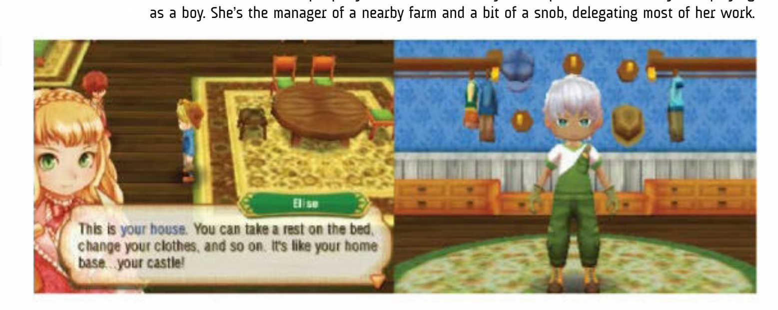
BEING PATIENT: *Story Of Seasons* is so stunningly slow at introducing new features that you don't unlock the ability to go online and visit friends' farms until around eight hours in.



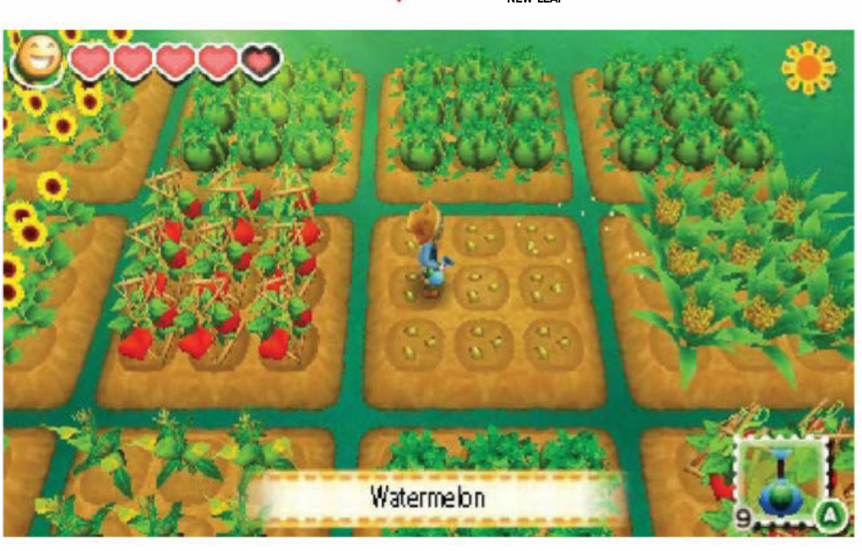
VERDICT

EVENTUALLY REWARDING BUT NEEDS PATIENCE





Below: Elise is one of the first people you meet, and one of your six potential brides if you're playing as a boy. She's the manager of a nearby farm and a bit of a snob, delegating most of her work.



Above: The process of tilling, planting, watering and harvesting can be a repetitive one but thankfully doing each action once covers a grid of nine sections, drastically reducing the amount of time needed. When you have a massive farm you'll be thankful of this.



DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: New Zealand
PUBLISHER: Dinosaur Polo Club
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £6.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN

TRAIN VALLEY





SID MEIER'S RAILROADS!

WORSE THAN

STYLE BETWEEN STATIONS

Mini Metro

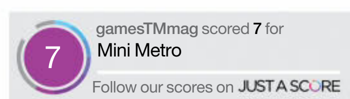
Style isn't something we would typically associate with a train simulation game, but that's more of less what we have with *Mini Metro*. It's easily the sleekest and most visually pleasing rail-themed game we've ever played. Modelling itself on classic underground rail systems from around the world (with maps to match) you connect shapes to ensure passengers reach their destinations. It's a simple premise elevated by perfect execution.

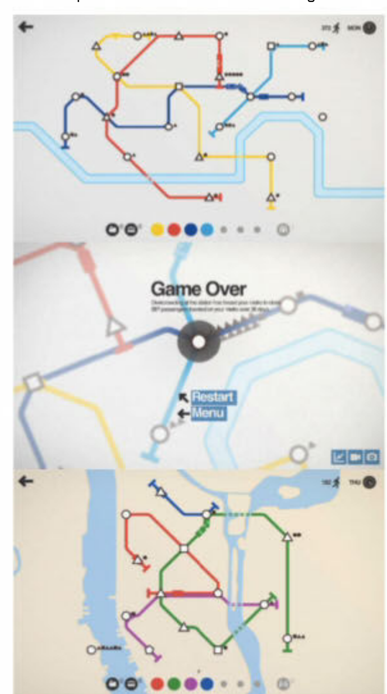
Mini Metro is a fine puzzle strategy game that has just the right balance of a quick turnaround of gameplay to maintain attention and enough depth of gameplay, gradually scaling as you play, to keep things interesting. The demands of your various stations are modest and managing the flow of traffic is basic enough. But then, as midnight on Sunday rolls around, you have to choose your tools for expanding and responding to new challenges in the coming week. That's where the strategy comes into play, and there's risk and reward to your choices. Once you begin to see stations building congestion and don't have any additional lines to add, new and creative solutions need to be employed to get things moving – lines need to be extended, stations closed and reopened with different routes. It all clicks into place so effortlessly and cleanly that it's a joy to play around with.

The only element of confusion is that it's not already a smartphone game. The simple interface screams iOS classic to us. Daily challenges add a consistent call to return and the sharp gameplay makes it a pleasing way to pass ten minutes. If you're after a light and engaging time sink, look no further.



AN UNDERGROUND HIT





Below: The classic underground map styles used in the game are instantly understandable and engaging, much as the maps from around the world were designed to be.

DETAILS

FORMAT: iOS
OTHER FORMATS: PC
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Curve Digital
DEVELOPER: Peter Moorhead
PRICE: £0.79
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN

DARKSTAR: THE INTERACTIVE MOVIE

ELEGY FOR A DEAD WORLD

WORSE THAN

AT LEAST THEY MADE IT QUICK

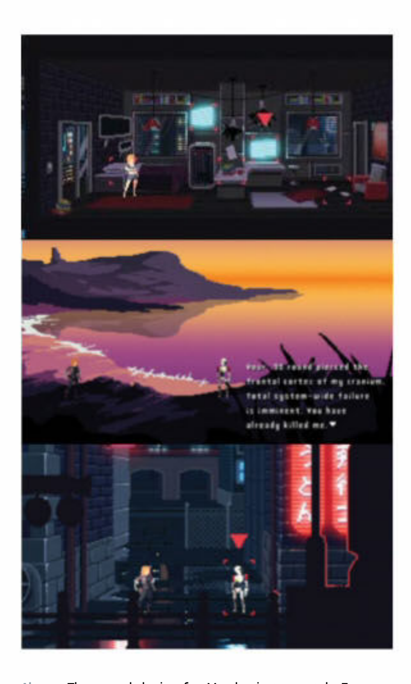
Murder

There's the hint of something really interesting about Murder, but then suddenly it ends. It's like the prologue to a really engrossing, if somewhat derivative, cyberpunk adventure, but just as the tipping point of the mystery arrives and you prepare yourself to dive into a seedy world of crime, the credits roll. 20-30 minutes in and you're already done; sometimes it's even shorter.

We're seeing more and more games that sit awkwardly between interactive fiction and gaming, and *Murder* is a great example of that difficult balance. On the surface it has the appearance of a fascinating cyberpunk point-and-click adventure, but it's really an on-rails narrative with little player agency. That is, unless you progress in a more meticulous way. Down that path leads a strange replay of the events, bereft of supporting characters save for a glitching man with static for a head, spouting mysterious conversation about what is and isn't real.

The trouble is we weren't left pondering the ghosts in their various shells by the end, but rather what this interactive experience was hoping to get at. Is it a think piece on the blurred reality of gaming, that interactivity is not agency as some might believe? Is it just a mind-bending future tale? The more we think on it, it's not so much that *Murder* isn't trying to pose these ideas, it just gets half way through the questions before the end. The art, music and design are spot on but the content just isn't robust enough.

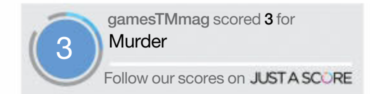
For the money there has to be an argument that it's almost a comic-book approach to storytelling, giving you a short snippet of a tale for a tiny price, but that model comes with the promise of more to come that's not here either. There's potential here, but not enough of a game to make *Murder* truly compelling.



Above: The sound design for Murder is top notch. Every surface and location has a unique audio backdrop that makes it very immersive and could have been used to great effect in something a little fuller.

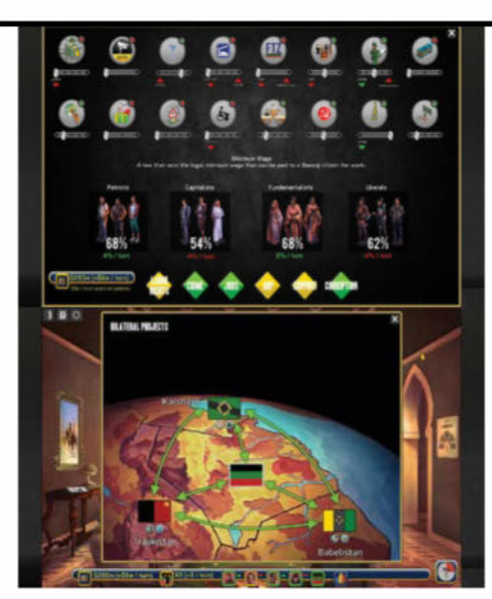
VERDICT

PROMISES MUCH, BUT JUST DOESN'T DELIVER



Below: The graphics aren't anything to write home about, but that's not *Rogue State*'s appeal; the strategy mechanics are surprisingly engaging considering you have no choice but to play as the bad guy.





SPINNING PLATES

Rogue State

There are bombs going off just down the road, our trade agreements with a neighbouring nation have fallen apart after an ill-advised pop at fundamentalism over the phone and we've just put out a panicked hit on another rival in the region because we think his oil might be the answer to all of our problems. It isn't, as it turns out, and as we leave in our motorcade to deliver an end-of-year press conference, a militant blows us up. And so our all-too-brief stint at the top of the pile came to an abrupt end; this is what *Rogue State* is all about – trying your best to keep everyone happy, while pilfering whatever cash you can and trying not to get shot.

In Little Red Dog's new turn-based strategy game, you play as the leader of a fictional middle-eastern nation that has just overthrown its despotic monarchy. Some will argue that this is a slightly risqué topic for a videogame, but handled in the satirical manner that it is, it doesn't seem too jarring. We were impressed by the depth of some of the mechanics, most notably the large variety of upgrade trees and policies – essentially a large menu of sliders that you're constantly tweaking to keep your population happy. The in-game population is split into four categories: Capitalists, Patriots, Liberals and Fundamentalists, which provides a decent amount of food for thought when it comes to implementing policy and taxation rates.

At the end of each turn a random event occurs, usually pertaining to a policy that needs actioning or things like building museums and wildlife reserves, each of which positively affect your opinion polls with some groups and adversely affect others, turning the game into a perpetual balancing act. However, we would have liked to see more variety in these scenarios, as in each of our playthroughs they were more or less the same. Once your reign has come to an end you're granted XP to take into your next playthrough to spend on upgrades, and the XP you earn depends on how long you remain in power, how happy each of the population types are at the end of your reign, and how much money you've managed to siphon off from the treasury and poured into your own private offshore bank account.

The only problem with this last practice is that it can feel a little at odds with the game itself from a role-playing stance. Often the best strategy games are the ones that immerse you on a personal level – by including a mechanic that involves stealing in order to earn points, you feel pretty shoehorned into being the villain. Still, this is a fairly minor gripe, and one that doesn't prevent *Rogue State* from being one of the more interesting indie games of recent months.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: USA
PUBLISHER: Little Red Dog Games
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £4.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: Windows XP, 1.6 GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 32-bit video card, 1,200MB HDD
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN

SUPERPOWER







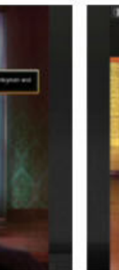
WORSE THAN

TOTAL WAR: SHOGUN 2

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

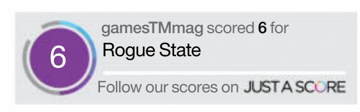
RAIDING THE COFFERS: We've never come across a game that involves governing a population or country before where one of the main aims is to steal money. Very naughty.





VERDICT

INTERESTING POLITICAL JAUNT, BUT CAN FEEL REPETITIVE



A-TAK THE ROCKS

Galak-Z

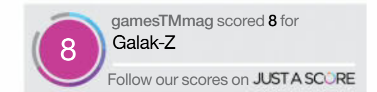
Galak-Z is a game that exhibits quite a range of influences. Controlling your ship is reminiscent of Asteroids; the random stage generation and permadeath are hallmarks of *Rogue*; you'll sneak past enemy vision cones just like in the stealth classics, and the cutscenes are straight from a hazily-remembered Saturday morning cartoon. There's a lot going on here, but it's a testament to the skill of developer 17-Bit that the game always feels cohesive.

When you find satisfaction in *Galak-Z*, it will be because you feel that you've achieved some level of mastery. The game's control scheme is a little unorthodox, but it allows you to pull off some impressive combat manoeuvres once you have some experience. Whether you're skilfully avoiding detection or making use of environmental features to engineer a clean getaway, the random level generation means that you'll always have earned your success in the heat of the moment, rather than through repetition. The high difficulty level forces you to work for your victories, but they're all the sweeter when you achieve them.

This won't be an experience for the faint of heart – if you lose a ship, it's gone for good along with the perks that go with it. Such frustrations are inherent to roguelikes, of course, but it's always galling to lose so much – especially if you're playing on Rogue difficulty, where checkpoints are five missions apart. If you enjoy looking beyond the familiar and putting a bit of time in, you'll find that *Galak-Z* is a well-crafted game that stands apart from its inspirations.

VERDICT

UNORTHODOX FUN FOR HARDENED PLAYERS



DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
OTHER FORMATS: PS4
ORIGIN: USA
PUBLISHER: 17-Bit
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £14.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: Memory: 3GB Disk space: 3GB CPU: Intel Core 2 Duo (2.6 GHz) / AMD Athlon 64 X2 (2.6 GHz) Graphics: Radeon HD 2900 XT (512 MB) / GeForce GT 430 (1024 MB)
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



Below: The game's stealth undertones are represented on screen with enemy sight cones – you'll want to stay out of these in order to remain undetected.



GO TOGETHER OR GO HOME

Forced

DETAILS

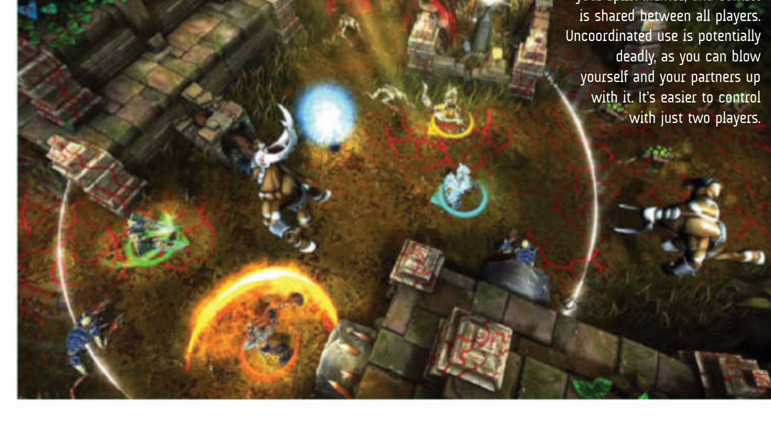
FORMAT: Xbox One
OTHER FORMATS: PC, Mac, PS4, Wii U
ORIGIN: Denmark
PUBLISHER: BetaDwarf
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £11.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-4 (2-4 online)
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes



There's an orb of light that accompanies you in *Forced*, a spirit mentor by the name of Balfus. You can summon it towards your character with a quick tap of a button, and on the way it'll activate healing beacons, destroy statues and do all sorts of other things. With four players, a team can co-operate to position themselves in ideal positions to solve a puzzle. If you're playing alone, you're going to be doing a lot of running around to achieve the same results. It's a clever idea, but one that isn't so cool in practice.

The experience described above is typical of *Forced* - it's a multiplayer game, but you probably won't realise that until you play it offline. After picking your class and loading up with perks and abilities, you'll head into battle and attempt to achieve various objectives – and these are invariably geared towards groups, as you'll be hacking down swarms of enemies while attempting to complete them. In your first boss fight, one player can concentrate on regular enemies, one on healing, and the other two on the boss. Alone, you have to fill *every* role.

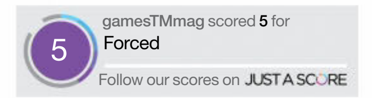
Forced is an average game concocted from above-average components – it's well-presented and contains interesting ideas. However, even if you avoid the ordeal of playing alone, the game is held back by some awkward design choices. There's very little explanation of the four available character classes, twin-stick aiming is counterintuitive for melee weapons, and certain optional objectives are only revealed after finishing a stage. Additionally, the game's setting is an aggressively bland fantasy fare. If you have a few friends who can work as a team, *Forced* can provide some fun. However, there are better co-op games out there and lone players should stay away.



The glowing ball of light is your spirit mentor, and control is shared between all players. Uncoordinated use is potentially deadly, as you can blow yourself and your partners up with it. It's easier to control with just two players.

VERDICT

DON'T FORCE YOURSELF TO PLAY IT



IT'S ALL COMING TO A HEAD

Game Of Thrones: Ep. 5 – A Nest Of Vipers

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox One
OTHER FORMATS: Android, iOS, PC, PS3, PS4, Xbox 360
ORIGIN: USA
PUBLISHER: Telltale Games
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £4.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN
BACK TO THE FUTURE





WORSE THAN
TALES FROM THE BORDERLANDS

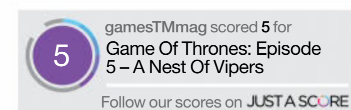
If anything could be said about Telltale's attempt to marry the heart breaking drama and high-octane action of *Game Of Thrones* with the interactivity that only videogames can provide, it's that it's been mildly successful. The same old problems that we've seen exhibited from the studio continue to crop up in *Game Of Thrones: Episode 5 – A Nest Of Vipers*, which only goes to cast a dark shadow on what it *does* do well.

With the first season close to wrapping up, we are finally seeing some of the story lines come to a head. What's clear is that it isn't just the big decisions that are having a major impact on the outcome of House Forrester, but many of the smaller – almost inconsequential – decisions as well. It's exciting to see, though any joy is often quickly dissipated by the same old story. Once again, Telltale's ageing game engine, commitment to decrepit mechanics and overall unwillingness to adapt leaves *Game Of Thrones* in a similar position to every other release that comes out of the studio.

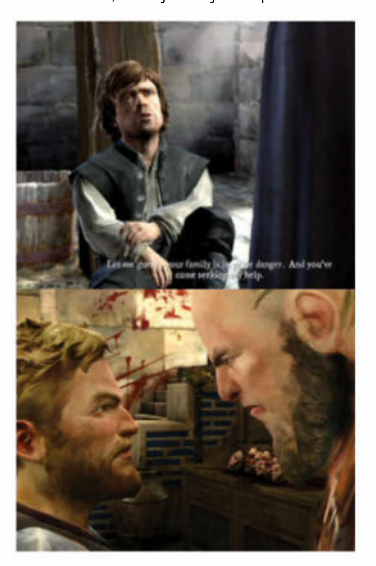
If you're willing to sit there and battle through technical inconsistencies, then a fantastic story of choice and consequence awaits. If, on the other hand, you're growing ever-frustrated by the fact that Telltale has released over 16 episodes of content since it found success with *The Walking Dead* and still hasn't refined its engine, then it might be worth holding out for the (hopefully more refined) inevitable release of *Season Two* next year.

VERDICT

TECHNICAL PROBLEMS RUIN A DECENT EPISODE



Below: While many *Game Of Thrones* actors reprise their roles from the HBO show, some of them seem strangely out of character; Daenerys and Tyrion in particular.



A GAME OF CHOICE AND CONSEQUENCE

Game Of Thrones: Ep. 6 – The Ice Dragon

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox One
OTHER FORMATS: Android, iOS, PC, PS3, PS4, Xbox 360
ORIGIN: USA
PUBLISHER: Telltale Games
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £4.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN
GAME OF THRONES EP. 5: A NEST OF VIPERS



WORSE THAN
LIFE IS STRANGE

It's the end of yet another Telltale Games venture, and here we are encountering the same array of frustrations as always. When offered the illusion of so much freedom and breathing room between decisions – in both little and large varieties – there's inevitably going to be some beats that feel a little stretched as everything comes to a head.

For the most part, Telltale has succeeded in telling a violent story that doesn't stray too far from the heartbreak that silently snakes through much of George R. R. Martin's original works. With *Episode 6 – The Ice Dragon*, Telltale has successfully made up for much of the predictability and disappointment of earlier instalments; creating something that feels like it can exist as a standalone story, as well as a companion to the source material. But that doesn't mean everybody will be happy.

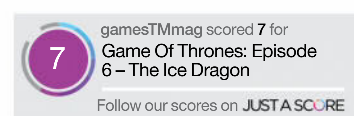
There's a surprising amount left unresolved as *The Ice Dragon* wraps up *Season One* – though a clean break was never going to be easy considering the scope of Telltale's multi-character story arc here. Impressively, a lot of the seemingly inconsequential decisions made in earlier episodes can have a big impact.

But the frustrations don't just start and finish with the disappointing conclusions to the Forrester's story arcs – leaving us precariously hanging until *Season Two* drops – there's also the array of Telltale technical problems. You can only be disappointed to see exciting, gore-fest final battles play out in Telltale's conventionally glitchy QTE-style. Still, we're excited to see where the studio will take this series.



VERDICT

A FANTASTIC FINALE MARRED BY TECHNICAL PROBLEMS





Above: *Game Of Thrones* is one of Telltale's most ambitious projects so far, proving to be an excellent companion to both the show and books.



"You know, ironically, this game that has you shooting people strengthens the bonds between friends and siblings"

ANDREW WILLANS,
LEAD DESIGNER, EVE VALKYRIE



WHY I ♥...
BATTLEFIELD 4

ANDREW WILLANS,
LEAD DESIGNER, EVE VALKYRIE

"It's been such a good year. Obviously I loved The Witcher III, *but that's such a no-brainer. I liked* Batman: Arkham Knight *as well... You know what? I really liked* Star Wars Battlefront. *I know there's been some criticism about its depth but it's* Star Wars, *dude! Ultimately it's down to* Battlefield *or* Rocket League, *because* Rocket League *blew me away from the minute I installed it. Why didn't someone make it sooner? You know when someone makes a game and you just go, 'Why wasn't this in existence before?' It's just amazing. I've sunk more hours into it than* The Witcher III. *But If I had to pick a game that I really love it would have to be* Battlefield 4. *It's purely because of the community aspect. It really has solidified friendships and maintained friendships through conflict. You know, ironically, this game that has you shooting people strengthens the bonds between friends and siblings. I have a lot to thank* Battlefield *for. I'd have to put* Rocket League *and* Battlefield *on a 50/50 scale, they are right up there."*

RETRO

NO.170



104
RETRO GUIDE TO…
STREET FIGHTER
With Capcom's latest almost upon us we celebrate the linage of gaming's great world warriors

BEHIND THE SCENES
112 **SYSTEM SHOCK 2**
The game that would mark a new chapter in narrative story-telling, we learn all there is to know about Irrational Games' shooter

RETRO INTERVIEW
118 **STEVE WETHERILL**
From *Manic Miner* to *Command & Conquer*, we pick the brain of one of gaming's great game-makers

GAME CHANGERS
122 **PRINCE OF PERSIA: THE SANDS OF TIME**
What made Ubisoft's 3D reboot of the retro classic so incredible? Perhaps it was that it pulled it off at all. We break down its game-changing qualities

DISCUSS | Have your say on all things retro on our dedicated forum **www.gamestm.co.uk/forum**

THE RETRO GUIDE TO... STREET FIGHTER

With Street Fighter V's release just around the corner, there's never been a better time to examine Capcom's seminal fighting franchise. How many of the following brawlers have you played?

CAPCOM'S *STREET FIGHTER* series is arguably the most important fighting franchise of all time. While its first release didn't exactly set the world alight, its sequel *Street Fighter II: The World Warrior* completely reinvented the genre and led to countless clones and sequels. Indeed, it's arguable that without the success of *Street Fighter*, we wouldn't have a great many other fighting franchises, such as *Fatal Fury, Art Of Fighting* and even *The King Of Fighters*. SNK, one of Capcom's fiercest competitors, was constantly locking horns with its Japanese rival, always releasing new brawlers that would hopefully draw gamers away from Capcom's own efforts. Capcom responded in kind, painstakingly tweaking existing games or creating new ones to ensure that the fighting scene was vibrant and exciting. Other companies were also desperate to muscle in on the scene, with Midway's *Mortal Kombat* being one of the most successful efforts from a Western developer.

The popular fighting scene soon turned competitive, with players starting with the release of *Street Fighter II* and either sticking with the series or moving over to other franchises like *Tekken*, *SoulCalibur* and the aforementioned *Fatal Fury*. It's a *Street Fighter* game that features one of the most breath-taking tournament moments however and we defy anyone to not become giddy with excitement after watching Daigo Umehara's astonishing string of parries in his dramatic battle against Justin Wong at Evolution 2004.

Street Fighter has had phenomenal success in the last 29 years, and *Street Fighter V* promises to reignite everything that we've loved about the franchise for so many years. Here's hoping it lives up to the challenge.



STREET FIGHTER 1987

ARCADE, VARIOUS

Average is sadly the fairest way to describe Capcom's first competitive fighting game. Taking control of a Japanese martial artist called Ryu, the aim is to travel around the world beating ten progressively tougher opponents, culminating in a battle against current world champion, Sagat. While the game is two-player, you only fight against Ken, Ryu's former training partner. In addition to introducing the special moves and six-button set-up that would become hallmarks of the series, *Street Fighter* is perhaps best remembered for the ridiculous pressure-sensitive pads that appeared on the deluxe cabinet version of the game and constantly broke down.







STREET FIGHTER 2010: THE FINAL FIGHT 1990

NES

This bizarre offshoot was released exclusively for the NES and has you controlling Ken, who has retired from fighting after becoming world champion and now works as a cyborg cop, naturally. Interestingly, this is completely different to the Japanese version of the game where the lead is called Kevin Straker.

Gameplay-wise, *Street Fighter 2010* is a scrolling fighter, and a particularly tough one at that. Even though Ken has a large amount of useful skills, including deadly projectiles, he's at a constant disadvantage due to the sheer ferocity and toughness of his numerous opponents. It's a shame, as the core gameplay is surprisingly entertaining.

STREET FIGHTER II: THE WORLD WARRIOR 1991

ARCADE, VARIOUS

Capcom's follow-up to *Street Fighter* not only improved upon it in every way, but also changed the entire genre. It introduced or refined a staggering number of gameplay mechanics, many of which still feature in the series to this day. Combos (which were created by accident) completely changed matches, creating an engaging flow simply not seen in previous fighting games; bonus stages were added; special moves were greatly refined; and it added eight playable characters, all with distinctive fighting styles.

Ryu and Ken return, and are joined by other distinctive fighters: E.Honda is a huge sumo wrestler, Zangief is a wrestler with devastating grapples, Blanka is an electric man-beast from the jungles of Brazil, Dhalsim is a fire-breathing yoga master from India, etc. The group of eclectic fighters is rounded off with Guile, a former special forces agent and Chun-Li, a Chinese martial artist and one of the earliest female character to appear in a fighting game. In addition to the eight playable characters, four bosses were also included: Sagat returned and was joined by Balrog, a powerful boxer, Spanish matador Vega and new boss M.Bison, the leader of criminal organisation Shadaloo. *Street Fighter II* was a success for Capcom, so much so that it cannibalised many of its other CP System boards to keep up with demand. While it received numerous poor ports on home computers, the SNES port was a huge success, highlighting the power of Nintendo's 16-bit console was.



STREET FIGHTER II: CHAMPION EDITION 1992

ARCADE, VARIOUS

The popularity of *Street Fighter II* saw not only plenty of competitors from rivals, but also updates from Capcom itself. The biggest change to the game was that Sagat, M. Bison, Balrog and Vega were now all playable characters, increasing the roster to 12. Another big change was the introduction of mirror matches, something that hadn't been possible in *The World Warrior*. The previous eight characters were also modified, with Ken and Ryu in particular being tweaked to feel more individual.







STREET FIGHTER II TURBO: HYPER FIGHTING 1992

SYSTEMS: ARCADE, SNES

Capcom's next upgrade was designed to combat the many official hacks like 'Rainbow Edition', which were appearing in arcades. The gameplay has been greatly sped up, which also meant that players had to be more precise when pulling off combos and special moves. All of the original characters, with the exception of Guile, were given new special moves such as Dhalsim's yoga teleport and Chun-Li's mini fireball. The base gameplay was tweaked again, too.

SUPER STREET FIGHTER II: THE NEW CHALLENGERS 1994

ARCADE, VARIOUS

Capcom's next update was a big one, introducing four new characters: Cammy, T.Hawk, Dee Jay and Fei Long. The game itself is a big improvement aesthetically over previous games in the series, due to using the CPS II board, which allowed for all new character animations and vastly improved backdrops. The gameplay was slowed down, and it's also the first *Street Fighter* to keep track of combos, first attacks, reversals and other special attacks.







SUPER STREET FIGHTER II TURBO 1994

SYSTEMS: ARCADE, VARIOUS

The last *Street Fighter II* game is arguably the most refined version and is known as *Street Fighter II X: Grand Master Challenge* in Japan. There's an adjustable speed setting and alternate character versions based on *Super Street Fighter II*. Air combos and super combos both feature, with the latter adding a new gauge to master and the former allowing players to perform juggles. It's also the first game in the series to feature Akuma.



STREET FIGHTER: THE MOVIE 1995

SYSTEMS: ARCADE

This terrible effort was based on the equally terrible 1994 movie. Created by Incredible Technologies, it's the first *Street Fighter* game to feature digitised characters, all of whom are based on the film's stars. It actually features lots of new mechanics, including exclusive special moves, interrupt moves, comeback moves and regeneration moves, but it's let down by the stilted animation, which makes fights feel extremely clunky.

"IT'S ONE OF THE FIRST AND BEST JOYSTICK WAGGLERS FOR HOME COMPUTERS"



STREET FIGHTER ALPHA: WARRIOR'S DREAMS 1995

SYSTEM: ARCADE, VARIOUS

Alpha features a distinctive cartoon style, six previous characters (Ryu, Chun-Li, Ken, Birdie, Adon and Sagat) as well as Rose and Nash and *Final Fight*'s Guy and Sodom. M. Bison is on boss duties, while Akuma and new guy Dan are secret characters. It introduces a revamped Super Combo system, Alpha Counters, two playing styles, chain combos and air blocking and the awesome two-on-one Dramatic Battle mode.





STREET FIGHTER II MOVIE 1995

PLAYSTATION, SATURN

This oddity was released to tie-in with Capcom's animated *Street Fighter II* movie. It's basically a life simulation, but you can enhance your cyborg's ability by studying bits of FMV (taken from the film and made for the game) to enhance attributes. Sadly, it's quite tough to play if you don't understand Japanese.







STREET FIGHTER: THE MOVIE 1995

PLAYSTATION, SATURN

This gets its own entry, as it isn't a conversion of the arcade game, but a standalone product; unlike the arcade game, the console ports were developed by Capcom. Although they use the same digitised characters, the animation is different and slightly better (although still poorer than a standard *Street Fighter* game). The biggest change is in the gameplay, with this version playing more like *Super Street Fighter II Turbo*. However, it adds Super Special Moves into the mix. It features four different gameplay modes: Movie Battle, Street Battle, VS Mode and Trial Mode, meaning it offers more longevity than its arcade counterpart. It's still largely a very disappointing fighter, though, played more today for its comedy value.





STREET FIGHTER ALPHA 2 1996

ARCADE, VARIOUS

In addition to greatly refined combat, *Alpha 2* adds a new Custom Combo system, which replaces the Chain Combo of *Alpha*. It's extremely versatile and can be activated whenever a character's Super Combo Gauge is Lv 1 or higher. Characters now have two Alpha Counters as well as secret rivals that appear if certain conditions are met. Character-wise, it adds Zangief and Dhalsim, Gen, *Final Fight*'s Rolento and Ryu fangirl Sakura, who shares many of his moves.



STREET FIGHTER EX 1996

ARCADE

While it's not perfect, this collaboration between Capcom and Arika does a great job of translating *Street Fighter* to 3D. It features nine new playable characters (Hokuto, D.Dark, Pullum, C. Jack, Skullomania, Blair, Allen, Kairi and Darun) as well as a new boss, Garuda. While utilising a 3D background, it effectively still plays as a 2D fighter, but adds the replays that were popular at the time. The Super Combo Gauge is divided into three levels, and it utilises Cancelling and Super Cancelling to great effect.

PETER ROSAS LOVES STREET FIGHTER II

The Street Fighter V producer on the classic brawler



What are your earliest memories of *Street Fighter II*?

My earliest memory was walking home from elementary school and stopping by the local bowling alley right after they got *Street Fighter II*. I just remember seeing this large crowd of teens huddled around this one machine and wondering what it was they were watching. When I finally got close enough to see the screen, I was blown away by the graphics at the time.

Another exciting memory was when I first saw players landing Guile's sonic boom combos. Seeing his moves cancel into special moves totally changed how I approached other characters, as it showed there was more to the game than I thought.

Why do you think *Street Fighter II* remains so popular with gamers?

I think there are quite a few factors as to why *Street Fighter II* remains so popular to this day. I could go on and on about the various reasons, but instead I will concentrate on two: iconic character design and music.

You have these iconic characters, whose design and fighting styles are caricatures of the country they represent. Although they seem outlandish, I think that in the back of everyone's mind they could actually visualise a one-eyed kickboxer in Thailand, or an enlisted soldier who fights out of the US kicking ass.

Another big reason is definitely the music. Just about every character theme in *Street Fighter II* not only fits the character, but also the stages in which the fighters do battle. The music also helps raise the tension of the battle with the songs speeding up towards the end of each round.

How critical is the music to the series as a whole, then?

I think it's pretty critical to the overall experience of the game, as it can really immerse the player into the game world. When *Street Fighter II* was released, it had amazing visuals, innovative character and battle design - as well as some of the best music ever created for not only fighting games, but games in general.

Who do you consider the best character and why?

I think the best character is Guile. He has great damage output, long range attacks and the best projectile recovery in the game. He also has the coolest combos!

What makes a great competitive fighting game?

The elements that make a good fighting game are accessibility, depth, and balance. Accessibility is important, as you want more people to be able to play the game and actually understand why they're winning or losing. The faster a player can figure out the game system and move on to the competitive aspect of it, the faster they can enjoy what a fighting game is all about.

Depth is important because once players understand the game they'll explore the engine to see what tactics they can devise to defeat opponents. If the gameplay is rigid, it runs the risk of turning off those who aren't able to develop tactics against the ones they're losing to – resulting in them quitting the game.

Lastly, balance is an element that can't be stated enough. Players like to feel that regardless of what character they use, they always have a chance at winning. A properly balanced game allows for that. Some characters may have to work harder than others, but at the end of the day, that work is rewarded with a victory.

STREET FIGHTER ZERO 2 ALPHA 1996

ARCADE



■ This arcade update was released exclusively in Japan and added EX versions of Chun-Li, Ken, Ryu, Sagat and M. Bison. Move lists were changed, some characters received new moves, while Custom Combos can be activated by pressing a kick and punch button of the same strength. A home port would eventually appear a year later on PlayStation and Saturn as part of the *Street Fighter Collection.*

STREET FIGHTER EX PLUS ALPHA 1997

PLAYSTATION

■ *Alpha* is an update of *EX*, released in early 1997. It adds Dhalsim and Sakura to the existing roster and includes a hidden bonus stage where you bust barrels. Gameplay-wise, it includes a few tweaks and enhancements; it adds several game modes, including one where you can simply watch two AI characters fight.





STREET FIGHTER III: THE NEW GENERATION 1997

ARCADE, DREAMCAST



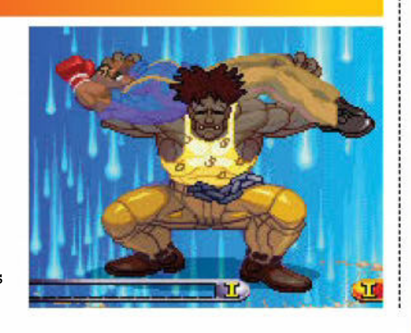


■ Capcom's follow-up to *Street Fighter II* was an incredibly bold game with stunning animation that introduced nine new characters: Alex, Dudley, twins Yun and Yang, Elena, Ibuki, Oro, Necro, Sean and boss Gill (who's playable in the console port). Only Ken and Ryu return from earlier games. The big change to the gameplay is the ability to parry, which allows you to deflect incoming attacks if timed correctly, and powerful special moves called Super Arts.

STREET FIGHTER III 2ND IMPACT 1997

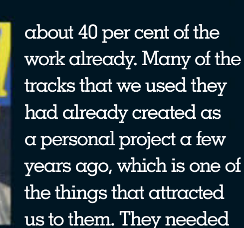
ARCADE, DREAMCAST

■ *Final Fight*'s Hugo and Urien, who is the brother of Gill were introduced in *2nd Impact*. It also adds Akuma as a secret character, while Yun and Yang now have completely different moves and specials (they were effectively different skins in the first game). EX Specials are added to the roster, while it's now possible to use Tech Throws and character-specific taunts.



RAY JIMENEZ

The Capcom producer talks Super Street Fighter II Turbo HD Remix



Why remake *Super Street Fighter II Turbo?*

Super Turbo was chosen because it has persevered so long. 14 years later and this version of *SFII* is still played in tournaments! I think it shows how great a game it is. Also, I think most gamers (old and new), can identify and have fond memories of the *SFII* games.

Why did the game take so long to arrive?

There were a number of setbacks, but the art creation definitely was the biggest one. What we started with was basically just not going to do the *Street Fighter* franchise justice and felt that it would be better to start over rather than release a game that didn't look its best. In the end, this delay also helped the project because we ended up being able to add more to the game, like a tournament mode and a more refined Remixed mode.

Were you not tempted to redo the animation to match *SFHD*'s?

Absolutely not! Many fans have asked why the animation was not redone, meaning: 'Why didn't we add more frames?' One of the main reasons is that if we added frames of animation, what makes the gameplay of *Super Turbo* so unique would change. Part of the reason *SFII* feels like *SFII* and no other game does is the timing of all the moves and frames. Adding any frames of animation will change all that and the goal was to bring *Super Turbo* to the present, not totally change it.

The second, and probably more limiting reason, is that it's technically not possible. Minus the tweaks we put into the Remixed mode, we're basically using the same code as the original game. This doesn't allow the changing of the art callouts to include frames that weren't there before.

The remixed music is excellent, how long did it take to create?

One of the great parts about that is that the OC ReMix guys had done about 40 per cent of the work already. Many of the tracks that we used they had already created as a personal project a few years ago, which is one of the things that attracted us to them. They needed some tweaking to be game ready, but the tracks were there already. The other 60 per cent I would say took about another six months to create.

Playing *HD Remix* online is like being back in the arcades. Was this your intention?

Online play was one of the main features because we wanted to bring back that arcade feeling. It's something that's lost now, but if we could pull off a good online experience, we knew that we would be bringing some of that magic back to a new generation of gamers.

Why do you think this series of games remains so popular?

As a fighting game, I think *Street Fighter* still remains because of its gameplay and its characters. Even though other fighting games use similar execution of moves, they still didn't capture the gameplay that *Street Fighter* had. It's a very esoteric and intangible item and shows how genius the original designers were in making *Street Fighter.*

The other factor is the characters. Look at how many people love and know the characters despite not being good at the game. Each character fills an archetype role in the series and their design is simple yet effective. There's a very intangible quality of why characters like Ryu are so penetrating, despite simply being a man in a gi.

How would you like *Street Fighter HD Remix* to be remembered?

Simply as a worthy addition to the pantheon of *SFII* games. Graphics get better every day, but it's gameplay that perseveres. If fans are still playing *HD Remix* as much as they're playing any of the other *SFII* games in the years to come, then we've done our job.

STREET FIGHTER EX2 1998

ARCADE

The biggest change to Capcom's 3D sequel was the Excel Combos, which allow characters to pull off various special and basic moves for a set amount of time. It otherwise builds on the mechanics of the original, but adds Super Cancelling and Guard Breaks. Several characters are added, including Blanka, Vega, along with newcomers Hayate and Sharon. It also adds three new hidden characters.





STREET FIGHTER ALPHA 3 1998

VARIOUS

Alpha 3 introduced new fighting styles called Isms. A-Ism is based on the three-level combo system of the original *Alpha*, X-Ism is based on *Super Street Fighter II Turbo* while V-Ism is similar to *Alpha 2*'s Custom Combos. It also adds a huge load of additional characters, including newcomers R. Mika, Karin, Juni and Juli and *Final Fight*'s Cody.

STREET FIGHTER III: 3RD STRIKE 1999

VARIOUS

This is easily the best 2D fight. It adds Chun-Li, Q, Remy, Twelve and Makoto, changes a bunch of commands for leap attacks, throws/holds and air parries and introduces Guard Parries that turn a character red when it's performed. This instalment brought a choice of two opponents in single-player mode, all the previous returning characters got new levels and endings, while a new Judgement System awarded points based on offence, defence, special techniques and other requirements.



STREET FIGHTER EX3 2000

PLAYSTATION 2

The third EX game swapped out Guard Breaks for the Surprise Blow, lets you call in a tag partner using Critical Parade and introduces Momentary Combos (allowing one special attack to follow another). While several older characters are added, Ace is the only new playable character. Released as a launch game for the PS2, it's widely considered the weakest game in the series.









HYPER STREET FIGHTER II: THE ANNIVERSARY EDITION 2003

ARCADE, PS2, XBOX

This was designed to celebrate the 15th anniversary of the Street Fighter series. Upon starting the game, players are presented with five different *Street Fighter II* variants. Normal is the original game, utilising all eight world warriors, Champ adds the four bosses, Turbo is basically *Street Fighter II Turbo: Hyper Fighting*, Super adds Cammy, Fei-Long Dee Jay and T-Hawk, while Super T adds Akuma and is basically *Super Street Fighter II Turbo*. Due to each version copying the original arcade outing there are an impressive 65 character variations. Released separately in Japan and Europe on PS2, it was sold in the U.S. as *Street Fighter Anniversary Collection*, where it was also paired with *Street Fighter III: 3rd Strike*. The compilation was also released on Microsoft's Xbox and the game was also ported to arcades.

> "CAPCOM'S FOLLOW-UP TO STREET FIGHTER II WAS A BOLD GAME WITH STUNNING ANIMATION





STREET FIGHTER ALPHA 3 MAX 2006

PSP

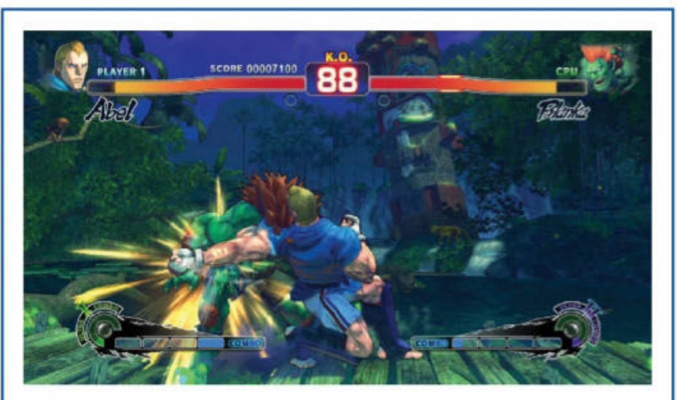
This excellent PSP port features minimal loading times and a new game mode called 100 Kumite. It also adds Eagle, Maki and Yun who had all appeared in the GBA port, *Street Fighter Alpha 3 Upper*, and adds Ingrid, who was last seen in *Capcom Fighting Evolution*. It's nigh on identical to the arcade original, boasting all the animation frames and sprites.

SUPER STREET FIGHTER II TURBO HD REMIX 2008

PSN, XBLA

This excellent digital release is effectively the seventh iteration of Capcom's popular fighter. In addition to being a perfect port, *Super Street Fighter II Turbo* also includes an HD Mode which features stunning new visuals by UDON Entertainment. There are also excellent new remixes courtesy of OverClocked Remix. Of note is Quarter Match Mode that lets you spectate and join online matches.





STREET FIGHTER IV 2008

ARCADE

After it let the series lie dormant for nine years, Capcom teamed up with Dimps to unleash a killer sequel. Overseen by Yoshinori Ono and based on *Street Fighter II,* its big new mechanic is Focus Attacks, which allow a character to absorb an attack and launch a counterattack. It also introduces insane over-the-top Ultra Moves and adds the Revenge Gauge, which fills up as you receive damage. In addition to 13 returning characters it adds Abel, Crimson Viper, El Fuerte, Gouken, Rufus and boss Seth.



SUPER STREET FIGHTER II TURBO PINBALL FX 2008

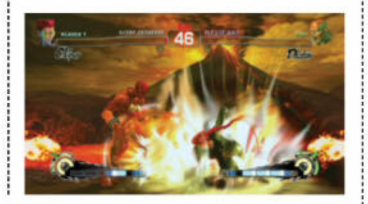
2008

This smart take on the pinball genre was a piece of DLC available for Pinball FX. It's based on Super Street Fighter II Turbo and is filled with lots of loving tributes, including characters and music samples. The table itself is fairly challenging with some great ramps and a variety of challenges based on the game.

STREET FIGHTER IV 2010

PS3, XBOX 360, PC

Two years after its arcade release, Capcom ported the game to home systems. It added online play, six new characters (Cammy, Gen, Rose, Sakura, Dan and Fei Long) a new challenge mode and a different opening cinematic. The PC version features three distinct visual styles, Watercolour, Posterize and Ink and is deemed the definitive version by Capcom.



SUPER STREET FIGHTER IV 2010

PS3, XBOX 360

Capcom released *SSFIV* as a standalone title, but at a suitably lower price. It features a number of new online modes, including Team Battle and Endless Battle and tweaked gameplay. It also adds two new fighters, Juri and Hakan, along with Dee Jay, T. Hawk, Dudley, Ibuki, Makoto, Cody, Guy and Adon for a total of 35 fighters.







SUPER STREET FIGHTER IV: ARCADE EDITION 2010

ARCADE, VARIOUS

The success of *Street Fighter IV* saw Capcom overhaul the game yet again. Originally planned as an arcade upgrade, it was eventually released on home systems in 2011. Capcom once again refined the game, tweaking the abilities of each character while giving some completely new EX Moves. Like the earlier *Street Fighter II* upgrades it made all the characters feel fresh and exciting again. Character wise, it adds twins Yun and Yang, along with Evil Ryu and Oni.



SUPER STREET FIGHTER IV: 3D EDITION 2011

3DS



Although none of the background levels are animated, this is still a fantastic port. The touchscreen can be used to pull off special moves for those not well versed in the game, and it features all 35 characters found in the home console versions. Cool new features include a fantastic looking (but incredibly ineffective) over-the-shoulder view and the ability to collect and trade cool figurines via Street Pass.





STREET FIGHTER IV VOLT 2011

IOS

Street Fighter IV had already been ported to iOS but *Volt* was a significant upgrade. In addition to introducing three characters (Cody, Balrog and Vega) it also added online play via Wifi. Matches are far more stable than they were and the addition of Wandering Warrior is a nice touch, but this is still a weak version.

AND THE REST

Here are the few spin-offs and updates we couldn't fit in, as well as the Vs series, featuring various Street Fighter characters

- X-MEN VS. STREET FIGHTER (1996)
- SUPER PUZZLE FIGHTER II TURBO (1996)
- MARVEL SUPER HEROES VS. STREET FIGHTER (1997)
- SUPER GEM FIGHTER MINI MIX (1997)
- STREET FIGHTER EX PLUS (1997)
- MARVEL VS CAPCOM: CLASH OF SUPER HEROES (1998)
- STREET FIGHTER EX 2 PLUS (1999)
- SNK VS. CAPCOM: MATCH OF THE MILLENNIUM (1999)
- SNK VS. CAPCOM CARD FIGHTERS CLASH: CAPCOM VERSION (1999)
- SNK VS. CAPCOM CARD FIGHTERS CLASH: SNK VERSION (1999)
- MARVEL VS CAPCOM 2: NEW AGE OF HEROES (2000)
- CAPCOM VS. SNK: MILLENNIUM FIGHT 2000 (2000)
- CAPCOM VS. SNK PRO (2000)
- CAPCOM VS. SNK 2: MARK OF THE MILLENNIUM 2001 (2001)
- STREET FIGHTER II TURBO REVIVAL (2001)
- SNK VS. CAPCOM: CARD FIGHTERS 2 EXPAND EDITION (2001)
- CAPCOM VS SNK 2 EO (2002)
- STREET FIGHTER ALPHA 3 UPPER (2002)
- SNK VS. CAPCOM: SVC CHAOS (2003)
- CAPCOM FIGHTING JAM (2004)
- NAMCO X CAPCOM (2005)
- SNK VS. CAPCOM CARD FIGHTERS DS (2006)
- SUPER PUZZLE FIGHTER II TURBO HD REMIX (2007)
- TATSUNOKO VS. CAPCOM: ULTIMATE ALL STARS (2008)
- STREET FIGHTER ONLINE: PUZZLE GENERATION (2008)
- TATSUNOKO VS. CAPCOM: CROSS GENERATION OF HEROES (2008)
- MARVEL VS CAPCOM 3: FATE OF TWO WORLDS (2011)
- ULTIMATE MARVEL VS CAPCOM 3: (2011)
- STREET FIGHTER: PUZZLE SPIRITS (2015)

STREET FIGHTER III: 3RD STRIKE ONLINE EDITION 2011

PSN, XBLA

Iron Galaxies' port of *3rd Strike* is superb. Effectively an update of the PS2 port, it adds a large number of graphical changes (including a rubbish HD mode) as well as new remixed soundtracks by Simon Viklund. As its name suggests, most of the changes were made to its new online mode, including Tournament and Trial modes and a cool Spectator mode. It's also possible to share replays on YouTube. Many consider it the best version of the game.

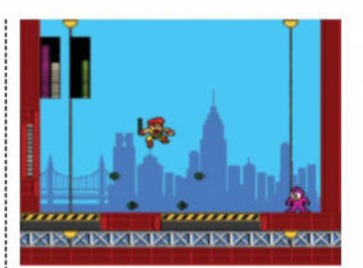


STREET FIGHTER X TEKKEN 2012

VARIOUS

This fun tag-team fighter combines the best bits of the two rival franchises. Its biggest addition is the Cross Gauge which can be used to pull off various moves depending on how much of the three-sectioned meter is filled up. Other new mechanics include the Gem System and Pandora mode, which can boost the remaining fighter when activated.





STREET FIGHTER X MEGA MAN 2012

PC

This curio started off life as a fan project, until Capcom stepped in to support it officially. Designed to celebrate the anniversaries of both *Mega Man* and *Street Fighter*, it's predominantly a *Mega Man* game with classic *Street Fighter* heroes acting as bosses and using their traditional special moves. It was given away for free on PC.

ULTRA STREET FIGHTER IV 2014

ARCADE, VARIOUS



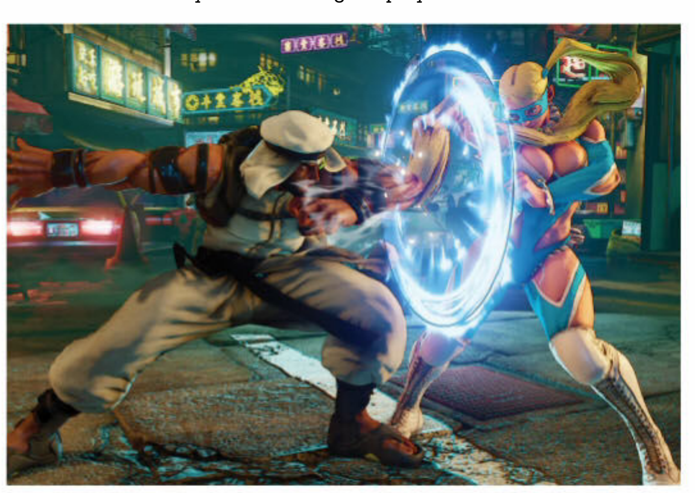
This was based on fan feedback and announced at the 2013 Evolution Championship Series. It adds Elena, Hugo, Poison and Rolento who all appeared in *Street Fighter X Tekken*, as well as newcomer Decapre. Gameplay-wise, it adds Red Focus and a delayed Wakeup technique and abolishes most unblockable setups.

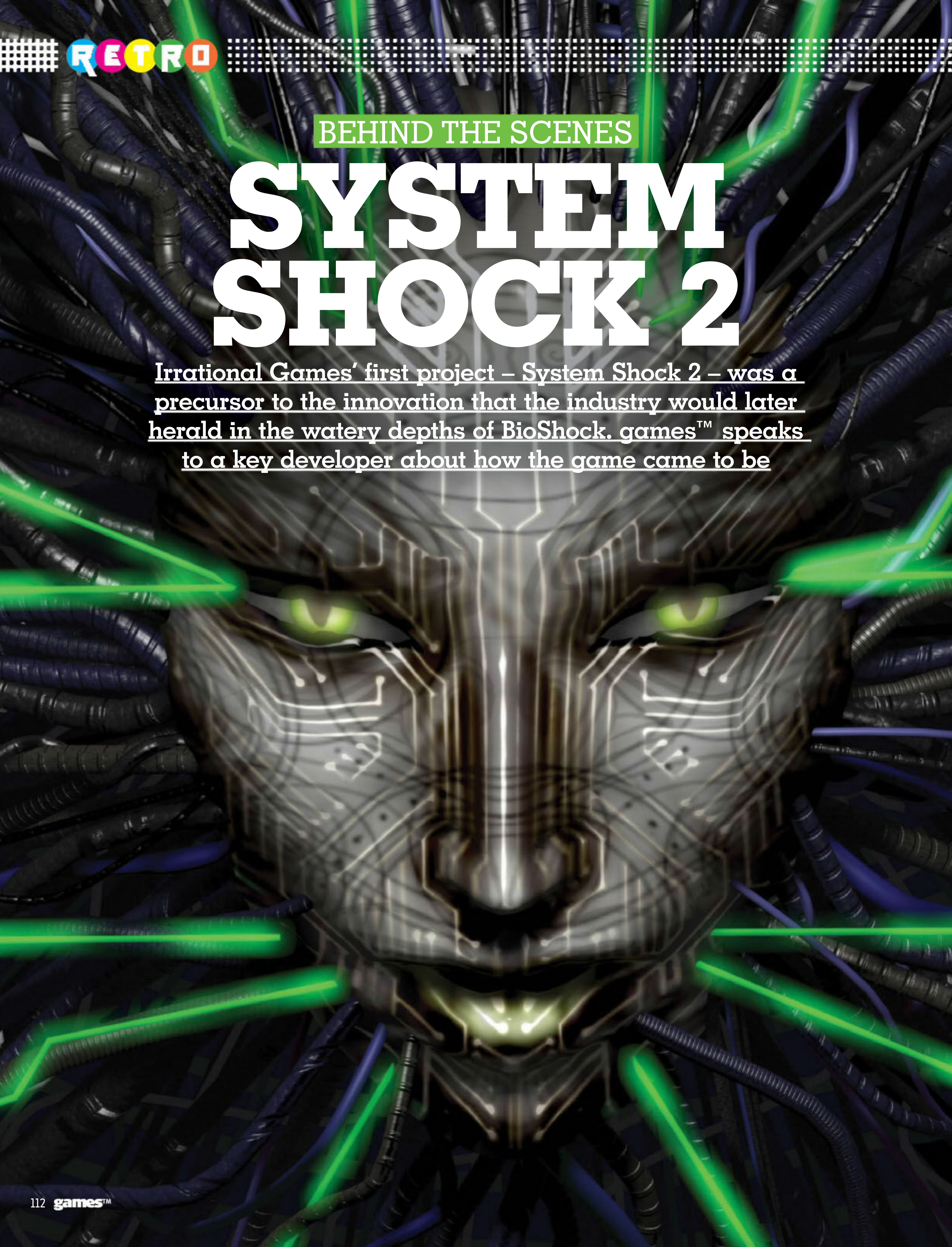
STREET FIGHTER V 2016



PS4, PC

This is shaping up to be something special indeed. Newcomers Necalli, Rashid, Laura and F.A.N.G. fit into the roster nicely, while characters like Ken and Dhalsim have been greatly overhauled, both mechanically and stylistically. Mechanically it introduces the V-Gauge, which builds up to three different techniques: V-Triggers, V-Skills and V-Reversals. This addition dramatically refreshes the gameplay.





BEHIND THE SCENES

SYSTEM SHOCK 2

Irrational Games' first project – System Shock 2 – was a precursor to the innovation that the industry would later herald in the watery depths of BioShock. games™ speaks to a key developer about how the game came to be



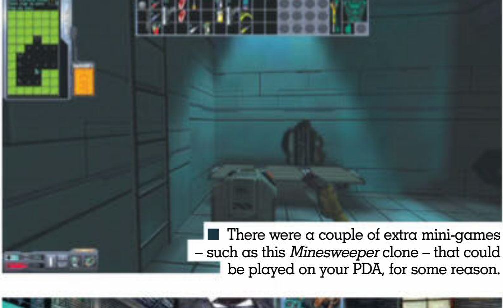
Released: 1999
Format: PC
Publisher: Electronic Arts
Key Staff: Ken Levine (lead designer), Jonathan Chey (project manager/programmer), Rob Fermier (lead programmer), Josh Randall (composer/producer)

Original designs for the game show some interesting influences.

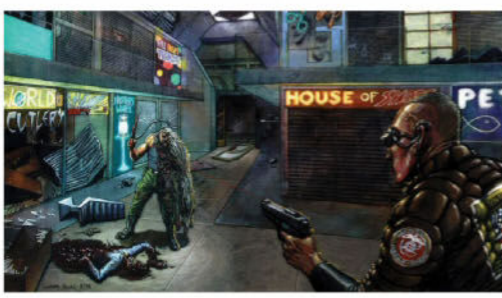
FOR ALL THE LOVE THAT BIOSHOCK RECEIVES THESE DAYS, it's easy to forget there was another title released years earlier that first introduced many of the elements that made the words 'Rapture', 'Andrew Ryan' and 'Would you kindly?' some of the most powerful in the industry today. *System Shock 2* implemented that careful blend of RPG and FPS that *BioShock* so often gets credited for, simply by virtue of *System Shock 2*'s relative insignificance upon its release – it'd be remiss to point out that the title didn't do particularly well at retail, despite the high praise it received from critics. But there's an interesting story hidden within the game's development; for Irrational Games – a recognisable name, despite its recent closure following *Bioshock Infinite* – *System Shock 2* was its first project, its chance to prove to the world who this small team of ex-Looking Glass members were and what they could do given the right setting and the freedom to craft a narrative.

"The three founders of Irrational were myself, Ken Levine and Rob Fermier," says Jonathan Chey, project manager on *System Shock 2*. "We all originally worked at Looking Glass. We worked on the same project together and that's how we met, and when we were there we kind of got to know each other. After we had left we decided to get together to try and start our own business, which became Irrational Games." For the first few months of its inception, Irrational Games began work on another project elsewhere before, as Chey explains, it was "yanked out from underneath us." He adds: "We had no income stream, we hadn't shipped anything and it was just three of us working out of our bedrooms."

A lucky result, then, that a discussion with Looking Glass – the team's previous employer – had come about. "They [Looking Glass] had picked up a deal with EA to develop three games, one of which went on to become the first game in the *Thief* series and one of which was a flight simulator that became known as *Flight Combat*. The third obviously went on to become *System Shock 2*. They didn't really have the resources to do it internally so we discussed it and eventually that became *System Shock 2* in a kind of roundabout process." But this title wasn't planned to be a sequel, the contract with EA simply stating that it would be a sci-fi game of some form.



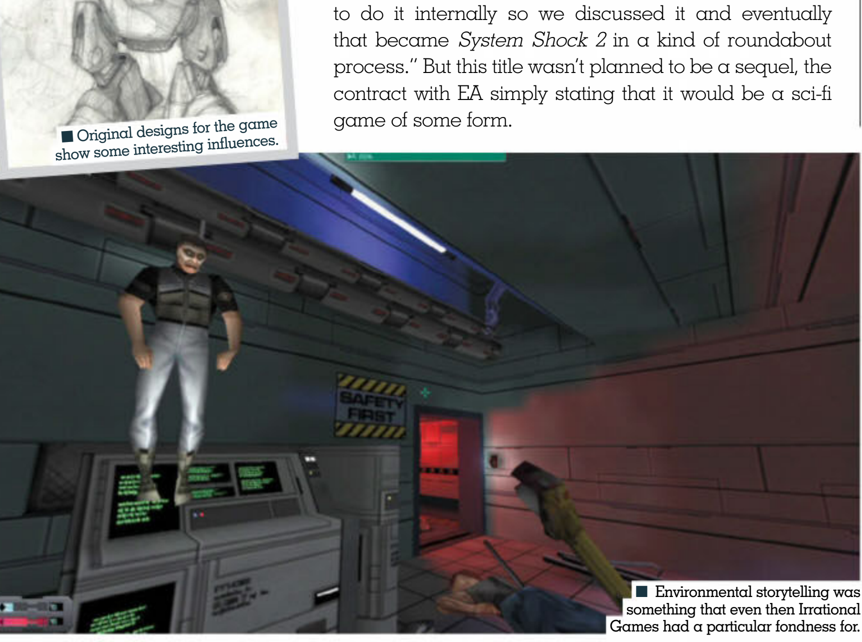
There were a couple of extra mini-games – such as this *Minesweeper* clone – that could be played on your PDA, for some reason.



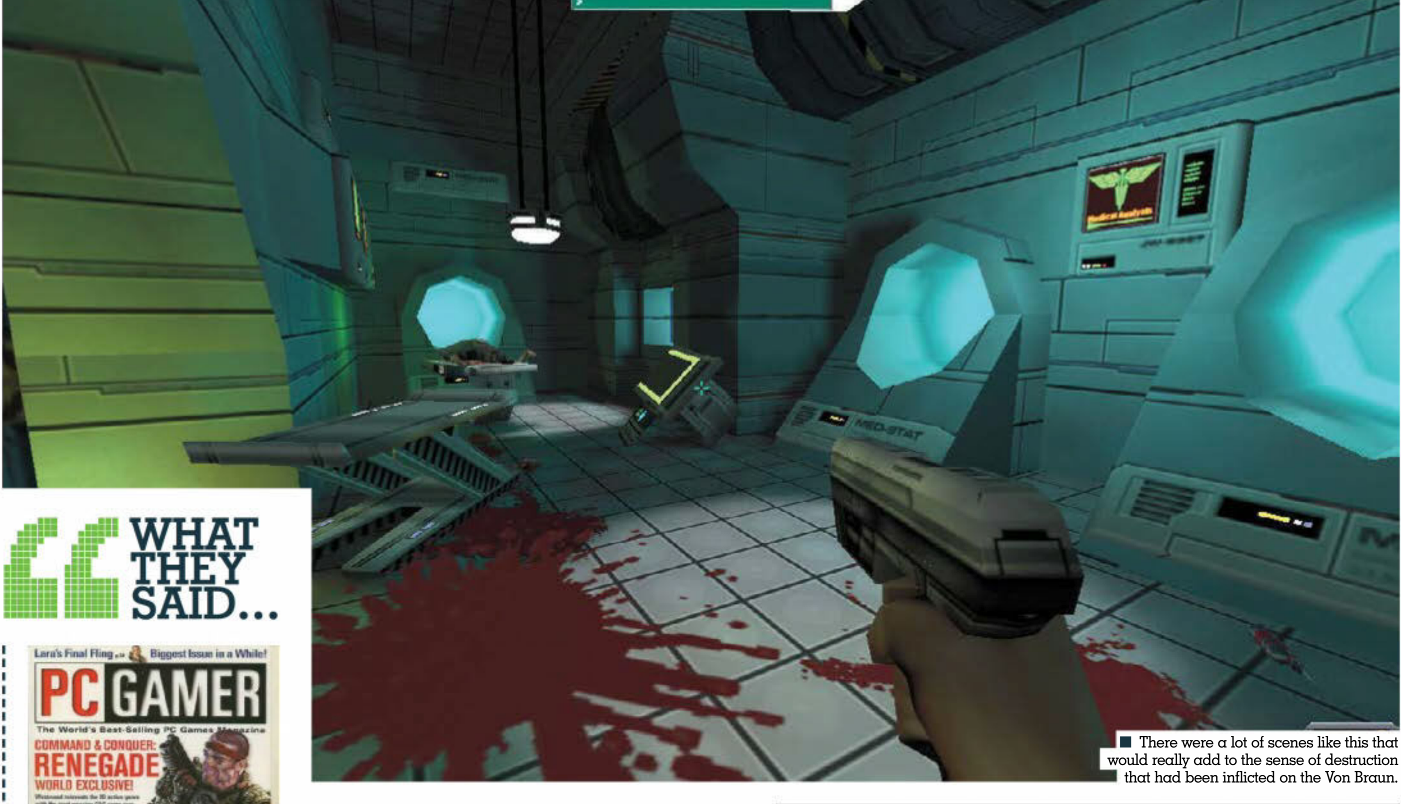
OTHER SHOOTERS WERE VERY ACTION ORIENTATED AND WE WANTED TO MAKE A MUCH DEEPER, MORE ENGROSSING GAME

"When it was originally being discussed it had a name attached to it," says Chey, "which was 'Junction Point'. Some work had been done on it by Looking Glass's Austin Texas studio, which was being run by Warren Spector. Then I think they decided that maybe they wanted to leave and start their own studio, and went on to produce the first *Deus Ex* game." Looking Glass co-opted the efforts of Irrational Games, believing the team would work on *Junction Point*. "I remember seeing some design documents or something like that," says Chey, adding that though little work had been done, there were some elements to it already. "I think it involved some sort of hub – the junction point – where you went on various missions," says Chey, "but we liked the idea of doing a *System Shock* sequel so we put together a pitch for that and got Looking Glass interested in it."

Though the original *System Shock* hadn't sold especially well – which EA had published and owned the rights to – it still offered an element of innovation within the FPS genre. It utilised sprites and featured no mouselook controls – akin to the likes of *Doom* at the time – but still created a simulated world with unique, if fiddly, control schemes to allow for crouching and leaning. Irrational Games wanted to really focus on the RPG elements with the sequel, and bring the idea of player choice to the fore. "In some ways we felt like it was continuing on not just from *System Shock*," says Chey, "but also from the *Ultima Underworld* games, which Looking Glass worked on as well." This would be



Environmental storytelling was something that even then Irrational Games had a particular fondness for.



There were a lot of scenes like this that would really add to the sense of destruction that had been inflicted on the Von Braun.

WHAT THEY SAID...

PC Gamer cover:
Lara's Final Fling... Biggest Issue in a While!
PC GAMER
The World's Best-Selling PC Games Magazine
COMMAND & CONQUER: RENEGADE
WORLD EXCLUSIVE!
System Shock 2 — Review, Tips, and Exclusive Demo!
SUBURBAN CHAOS!

I didn't want to see what horrors awaited me on the other side [of a door]. To me, that sort of vested emotional interest is any computer game's greatest ambition, and System Shock 2 achieves it in style.

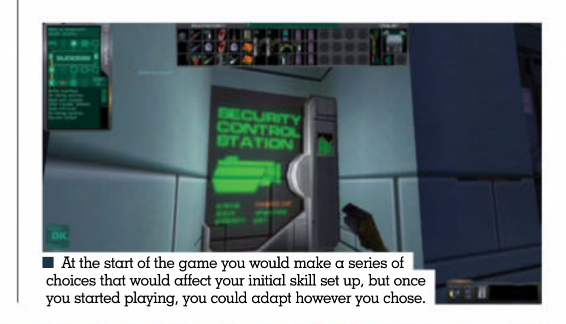
PC Gamer, 1999

the central pillar around which *System Shock 2* was built, giving it a much deeper level of play than the typical FPS was offering. "This was around the time that the original *Half-Life* was being developed and a lot of the other players in the shooter space were very action orientated, and we wanted to try to make a much deeper, more engrossing game. We didn't have an enormous budget but role-playing systems were generally cheaper to develop than doing really, really complicated simulations."

Of course, much of those simulation elements from the original *System Shock* carried over, but not entirely because of the game's heritage. Looking Glass was in the midst of developing *Thief*, and alongside it the Dark Engine; Irrational Games was given access to this engine to develop *System Shock 2*, and by virtue of the software's features, much of the simulation elements were able to be easily included. "We knew that technology was going to be available so we decided then that we were going to take advantage of it," Chey explains. "So the *System Shock* monsters walk around the level, they can hear sounds, they have vision cones so you can sneak up behind them, if they think they see you they'll search around for you… so all that stuff kind of came out of the AI that had been developed for *Thief*." Chey adds that the engine's systems and features were all tuned to "provide a different experience," enabling a more combat-oriented game than the stealth-heavy *Thief*. "We wanted a game where there were opportunities to optimise your combat situation rather than just running in and blasting everything – which was kind of standard at the time," says Chey, highlighting just how different *System Shock 2* was intended to be.

IT CAN BE QUITE SCARY WORKING IN AN AREA WHERE THERE AREN'T ANY SUCCESS STORIES

"It can be quite scary working in an area where there aren't any success stories," Chey says of the challenge of approach something in a totally new way. "You can't say, 'this is going to be like *Unreal*, only better.' That's actually a very difficult thing to do. I think it's mistake that a lot of developers make – you know, it's very hard to dislodge someone that is very dominant in a particular genre." Chey adds that working in an "unexplored part of the space" is especially difficult for a number of reasons. "You don't have a lot of examples to draw from on how it should be done," he says, "but then there's always a worry that maybe the space is unexplored because maybe people don't actually want to play a game like this. So



At the start of the game you would make a series of choices that would affect your initial skill set up, but once you started playing, you could adapt however you chose.

The character models weren't especially detailed, even for the time, but that didn't stop these guys imparting a sense of dread.



we didn't really know that." Despite all the ambition, however, Irrational Games still wanted to make a game that was beholden to the original, one that was at once in keeping with the strengths that Looking Glass had created prior but modernised. The gap between the two games – five years by the time the sequel released – was large enough that huge strides in technology, and therefore videogames, gave the team an objective list of improvements that needed to be made.

"We knew there were things we liked about it and there were things we were less keen on," Chey tells us. "I think there had been some major innovations in the first-person shooter genre since the first game shipped. For example, the original game didn't have mouselook. You would steer your character around with the keyboard and you would move the aiming reticle on the screen with the mouse."

Chey adds that Looking Glass had been "very keen" on the inclusion of leaning as a thing you could do in a first-person shooter: "You could lean and duck [in the original] and you did that with the little image of character in top right of the screen with a bunch of nine different divisions and you'd click on them to control angle. It was kind of clumsy, because it was early days. So we kind of wanted to bring the game up to speed, with how first-person shooters were controlled." The team, with the new Dark Engine, was also able to modernise the visuals; in fact, it was a necessity if it was to match its contemporaries at all.

"But then there were just things that were in the original game that we just thought were really cool and that we should keep them, but we had to find out a way to best implement them." As a particular example Chey drew attention to the original game's freedom to backtrack through the environments, a facet that was also implemented into *System Shock 2* and, later, *BioShock*. "That was a huge part of the original *System Shock*, and we continued that so there was an elevator and you can go back to different levels if you want to and pick up an object you couldn't get on your first time through. We wanted to keep things like that to see whether we could improve them, I guess."

BEFORE BIOSHOCK

The ways in which System Shock 2's DNA runs throughout Irrational's greatest game





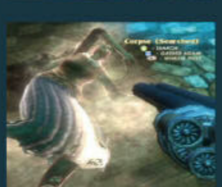
AUDIO LOGS

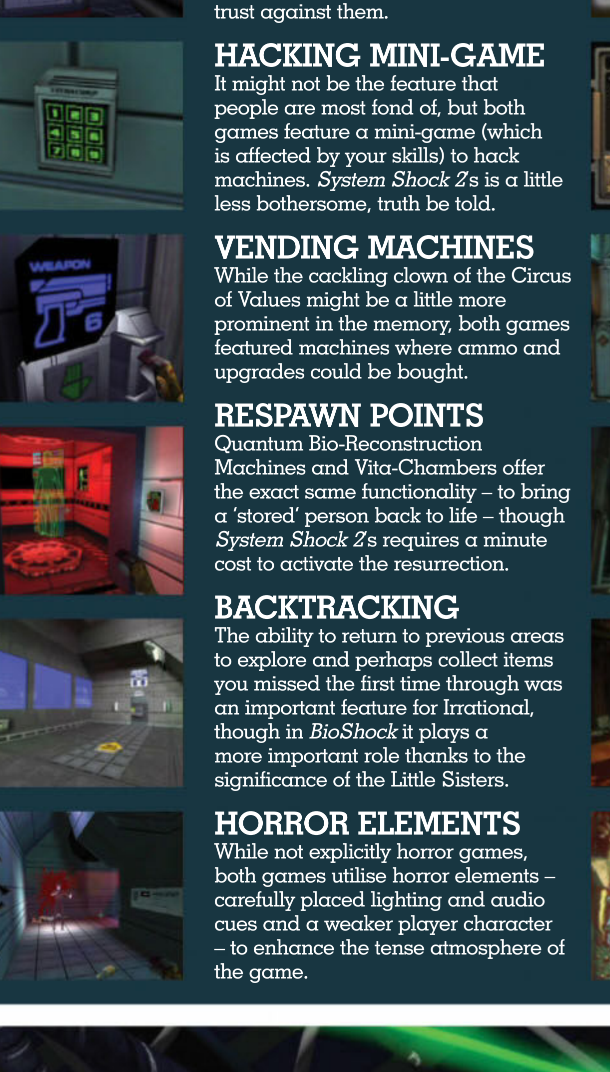
Perhaps one of the key things that BioShock is praised for is through its collectable audio logs, whereby much of the detail of the world and its characters are revealed. *System Shock 2* did this first.



'MAGICAL' ABILITIES

Though one game calls it 'psi abilities' and the other 'ADAM', the two are interchangeable. Both let you unlock powerful and unique abilities to aid in combat and exploration.





PERVASIVE ANTAGONIST

Though *BioShock*'s revelation changes who the antagonist is, both games feature a character that you interact with throughout the game – and both end up using the player's trust against them.



HACKING MINI-GAME

It might not be the feature that people are most fond of, but both games feature a mini-game (which is affected by your skills) to hack machines. *System Shock 2*'s is a little less bothersome, truth be told.



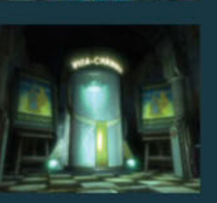
VENDING MACHINES

While the cackling clown of the Circus of Values might be a little more prominent in the memory, both games featured machines where ammo and upgrades could be bought.



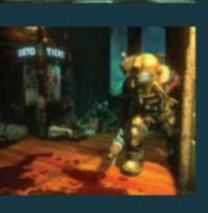
RESPAWN POINTS

Quantum Bio-Reconstruction Machines and Vita-Chambers offer the exact same functionality – to bring a 'stored' person back to life – though *System Shock 2*'s requires a minute cost to activate the resurrection.



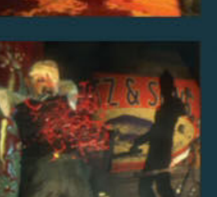
BACKTRACKING

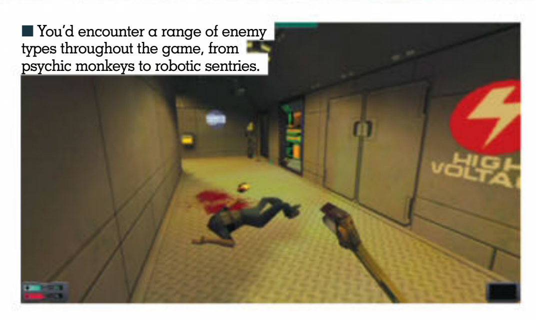
The ability to return to previous areas to explore and perhaps collect items you missed the first time through was an important feature for Irrational, though in *BioShock* it plays a more important role thanks to the significance of the Little Sisters.



HORROR ELEMENTS

While not explicitly horror games, both games utilise horror elements – carefully placed lighting and audio cues and a weaker player character – to enhance the tense atmosphere of the game.




You'd encounter a range of enemy types throughout the game, from psychic monkeys to robotic sentries.

This all tied into the freedom of choice that *System Shock 2* was to impart onto the player, an idea that was – for the most part – hugely novel for the first-person genre. The RPG mechanics meant that from the outset a player could decide not only where to go and when, but also how to fight and what skills to improve. Would you become a hacker intent on bypassing enemies through locked routes? A gun-wielder hoping to take the fight directly to the monsters of the Von Braun? Or would you utilise the numerous psychic abilities to gain an advantage in the fight?

"I mean, that created a lot of mind-bending problems when the player is not locked onto a path," says Chey of the game's freedom. "It's obviously harder to do than scripted events like in modern shooters, which are very highly reliant on scripted set-pieces – like, maybe you walk into a room and a helicopter comes in and shoots rockets at you and a tank comes in and explodes, you know, all that kind of stuff. It's all scripted, set-piece kind of stuff. That's obviously much harder to do in a game where you don't know which door the player is going to walk into the room through. We had a couple of set-pieces, but most of our attention was on building a bunch of missions that could be done… not in an arbitrary order, but certainly there were different permutations that they could be done in, and that added work to the project."

Despite the gameplay improvements that Irrational Games wanted to bring to *System Shock 2*, however, there was a single, core idea that the team had decided was important to work with. It wasn't anything to do with the original's systems or its simulation, but instead its story – more specifically, its lead antagonist: SHODAN. "We had different objectives, but of course the goal was to pick up on the most interesting things in the original story and the narrative – which we thought was SHODAN, your antagonist who we thought was a great character." But SHODAN was implemented as so much more than just a character to deepen, but instead an aspect of the gameplay itself.

"One of the things that we really liked about SHODAN was that, unlike a lot of game villains who just appear in a couple of cutscenes and there's an end of level boss fight, you kind of feel you have a relationship with SHODAN that develops during the course of the game, and you get to know her and she interacts with you. One of our favourite things from the original game was how SHODAN would talk to you and threaten you and something would actually happen as a result of that." To build further on this aspect, Irrational implemented

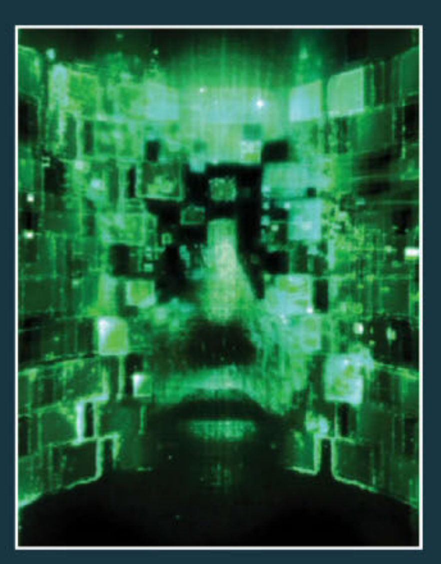
THERE WAS NO POINT WHEN I WAS WORKING ON IT WHEN I THOUGHT 'OH YEAH THIS IS GOING TO BE FANTASTIC'



SHODAN LIVES ON

A surprising announcement of a third game in the series

IT HAS BEEN 16 years since *System Shock 2* launched, and aside from a re-release on Good Old Games (and later other platforms) and an enhanced version of the original, there was no concrete evidence that we'd ever see another entry into the franchise. Until now. OtherSide Entertainment – coming out of nowhere – has unveiled that *System Shock 3* is in development. The developer is formed of many ex-employees of Looking Glass, including creative director of the company Paul Neurath. While it is a something of a surprise, it's not all that unexpected: the rights to *System Shock* was publisher Night Dive Studios' first purchase back in 2013, when it released the original games for modern hardware and even said recently that it was considering a third game in the franchise.

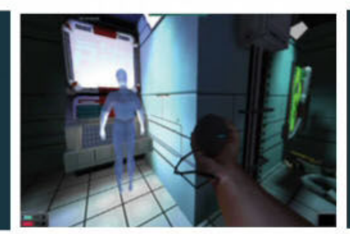


> A GAMING EVOLUTION

System Shock > System Shock 2 > BioShock



The sequel cast off the sprite-based graphics for something more modern, as well as bringing RPG elements to the forefront.



Much of the gameplay remained the same, but the combination of new elements made for a rich experience.







System Shock 2 shines where it counts: in immersive gameplay that bends genres. Gamers looking for a refreshing change of pace from redundant fragging need look no further
Maximum PC, 1999

a "kind of love/hate relationship with her" where, depending on your actions, you would be reprimanded or rewarded by the omnipresent AI. Chey highlights how future games came to adopt this kind of relationship between antagonist and player, such as GLaDOS in the superlative *Portal* or even the developer's own Andrew Ryan (and later Atlas) in *BioShock*.

It's amazing to consider just how innovative *System Shock 2* was, especially for its time. It introduced so many elements into the first-person shooter genre that just weren't being considered, and improving on the foundation set before it by Looking Glass in the original. But it's especially awe-inspiring considering the situation with which it was developed: a small team, with a small budget and even less experience. "It was a *very* small team," says Chey. "It was no more than 15 people, Irrational itself was probably only fewer than 10 people and we had a few Looking Glass people that were loaned to us for the duration of the project. We didn't have a lot of experience. I mean, I was the project manager of the game, and I had never managed anything. My previous job at Looking Glass was as an AI programmer, so I went from two years of experience doing that into project management. And I wrote the AI for *System Shock 2* as well. Ken was the lead designer and he'd never had a lead design role before. And then we had a bunch of people we had hired, and most of them I would say it was their first job in the industry."

For such a team to produce a game as well-revered as *System Shock 2* was unusual at this point, by now the industry had begun to settle into a routine and – by and large – new games and projects were being designed by reputed developers. Not so with Irrational Games. "It was terrifying," recalls Chey. "I don't know about Ken and Rob but I was terrified, because I was in charge with shipping this game and I'd never done that before. It was imperative for us. There was a lot of money, it wasn't a lot of money for game development but for us it was a lot of money and it just seemed like the situation was going to turn out pretty badly – that it was an opportunity to really mess it up."

Chey goes on to explain that Irrational was mostly insulated from the financial pressures and expectations – "we were building it for someone else," he explains – but that didn't mean there wasn't anything at stake.



It's interesting just how many similar design elements can be seen in *BioShock*. There's a very similar scene like this in the opening areas of Rapture.




There were a large number of psychic abilities, some were used for combat, others for providing buffs and some for interacting with the environment.

For one thing the financial success of Irrational Games relied on it, but it was the developer's opportunity to stake its claim in the industry. "For us we wanted to make a really great game to prove we were a great developer so we could go on to bigger and better things in the future," explains Chey. "We kind of knew that it was very unlikely that we would get rich from making *System Shock 2*, but it was kind of proving ourselves – you know making our name as a developer, and in that sense it sort of set us up for the rest of the things that we were able to do at Irrational." Without *System Shock 2*, it seems we might never have seen many of the great titles the developer would later go on to create.

Even with the developer's ambition, however, it was by no means a surefire success. "I did enjoy playing it," says Chey, "and I remember playing it actually after we sent off the final gold master and I actually had time to sit down and play, and I did kind of think 'wow, this is actually pretty good. This is good, right?' When the reviews came in I was completely over the moon. I was shocked that people liked it as much as they did." Even so, Chey recalls that *System Shock 2* and the games that Looking Glass created were "always quite bad up until about a month before they shipped," owing to the number of different elements included into the game. "Those games are always one step away from being a disaster," he says with a laugh, "there was no point when I was working on it when I thought 'oh yeah this is going to be fantastic'."

As it turns out, the effort was worth it, and though it wasn't a massive seller at retail, it still received great reviews from critics. Despite the fondness with which Jonathan Chey remembers his time working on *System Shock 2*, there's a poignancy to his final thoughts – Irrational Games was a team up against it – a low budget, very little time and a lack of experience. Yet here was a developer-driven team determined to prove themselves. "It's the hardest I've ever worked in my life," says Chey, "I will never work that hard again – I don't think I'd be capable of it." xxx

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INTERVIEW

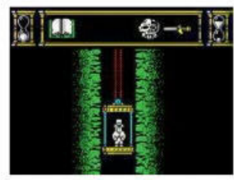
STEVE WETHERILL

From Jet Set Willy to Command & Conquer and Dune 2000, Steve Wetherill has enjoyed a varied and successful career. **games™** caught up with the coding veteran as he beavers away on his latest project, the online RTS Battle Pirates

SELECT GAMEOGRAPHY



Jet Set Willy (1984)
Coder



Heartland (1986)
Coder



Command & Conquer (1995)
Technical Director

How did you get started in the gaming industry?

After college, I acquired a ZX Spectrum and inevitably a few games. I became curious about how they were made and began to dissemble some of them, eventually creating my own demos in Z80. The second of these I sent to Software Projects – among others – and they gave me an interview at their offices in Woolton, Liverpool.

What was the demo like?

It was a side-scrolling platform game. It was created on any number of late, late nights in a freezing cold bedroom in a house on Airedale Road, Kexborough, near Barnsley. Some of its sprites, including a spinning camel, rotating space station and CND symbol made it into the CPC version of *Jet Set Willy*.

What was it like, working on such classic games such as *Jet Set Willy* and *Manic Miner* on CPC?

It was naturally a very exciting experience for me. I learned a lot working with Derrick Rowson [Wetherill's co-developer for *Manic Miner* and *Jet Set Willy* on CPC) who was more experienced than me. We never saw the source code of the Spectrum originals so we basically reverse-engineered them. Matthew Smith himself was not a regular at Software Projects although do I recall seeing him a few times, and he did hang out after work occasionally. He certainly didn't do any work in the office during my tenure since his development systems were at home.

> WE HAD A LOT OF FREEDOM, BUT IT WAS VERY CHAOTIC

What are your memories of Software Projects itself?

We had a lot of freedom, but it was very chaotic. Company management seemed to be making it up as they went along and there was no development process or reporting structure to speak of. At first it wasn't clear what we were supposed to be working on.

There were various talks with computer manufacturers about versions of *Manic Miner* and *Jet Set Willy* but nothing came of it. We obtained an early Japanese MSX computer with the intention of porting games to it, but Software Projects refused to buy any development tools or documentation! Thankfully, Amstrad released the CPC 464 and here was a machine that you could actually buy at retail and had the tools available and the actual documentation.

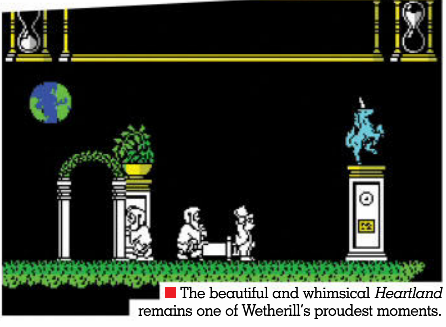

NAHQ DECODING
TIBERIUM REFINERY
POWERED ASSAULT ARMOR
GDI WAR FACTORY
HOVER MLRS
HELIPAD
LIGHT INFANTRY
POWER PLANT
DISC THROWER
BARRACKS
HARVESTER
enemy
life : 3
score
3:56
stage 1



The online browser RTS *Battle Pirates* is Wetherill's latest project.

FORMER COLLEAGUE MICHAEL LEGG ON STEVE WETHERILL

I've had the great pleasure of working with Steve for many, many years, going all the way back to Westwood in the mid-Nineties. Steve and I share a love of coding, gadgets, technology and Indian food. He has a passion for games and creating them and is an excellent programmer. When we were working long crunch hours, Steve was also a fantastic leader and always there in the trenches with us. Even when at a top management level, he's never afraid to roll up his sleeves and help debug or troubleshoot problems. On top of that, he always keeps his cool and provides a smile – a rare breed indeed, and I'm thankful to be friends with him.



The beautiful and whimsical *Heartland* remains one of Wetherill's proudest moments.



Wetherill kick-started his career converting Matthew Smith classics *Jet Set Willy* and *Manic Miner*.

Why did you leave Software Projects?

Since Matthew Smith had failed to produce anything after *Jet Set Willy*, there were no further Amstrad ports required. Original game development didn't really seem to be an option, and by this time some of my colleagues – Marc Wilding and Stuart Fotheringham – had already left to go and work at Odin Computer Graphics. So once *Jet Set Willy: The Final Frontier* was completed, I left to join them. I saw Odin as a clear step up and they were fully focused on creating original titles. They had programmers, artists and musicians. While I'll always be grateful for the opportunity Software Projects gave me, at Odin I was able to spread my wings and develop my first original games.

What was your first game for Odin and how was office life different there?

Nodes Of Yesod on the Spectrum. It was very much a team effort, and while I ended up doing much of the code, George Barnes and Keith Robinson also coded while the art was shared by Stuart, Colin Grunes and Paul Salmon. While things were better organised than at Software Projects, there was still plenty of time for goofing around and we'd often also work late and sleep under our desks. One morning, boss Paul McKenna had arranged to show some potential business partners round. He entered the room with a procession of suits as we retreated deeper into our sleeping bags, praying nobody would notice us.

Odin was rightly renowned for its beautiful and playable arcade adventure games.

Thanks! *Robin Of The Wood* was Paul Salmon's brainchild. He initially wanted to do some sort of 3D graphical presentation but I was not convinced it was feasible on the Spectrum, so we ended up with the flip screen game you see in the final version. It was better planned than *Nodes Of Yesod* and was a larger game in terms of both number of screens and variety of gameplay. I created a map editor so Paul could work quickly on level designs and the C64 version was developed in tandem with Marc Wilding. I forget how the level data was created for the C64, but I think a lot of things were done visually as in 'oh ok, it does X on the Spectrum, I can make it look that way on the Commodore by doing Y'. There was also a sort of race to the finish and a bit of friendly rivalry. I'm gonna say that it was a tie and they were released simultaneously!

Very diplomatic! And *Heartland*?

Heartland was derived from Colin's graphical rendering of Bertie/Eldritch [the main character] and it evolved from there. The masked sprite and object rendering gave it a very solid look and it came together very well. I did the CPC version and was most pleased with that – it used the chunky 160 pixel wide mode but everything was very colourful and the game played much more quickly and smoothly.

What happened to Odin?

Odin had a tough time fulfilling the agreement with British Telecom. In retrospect, we were too inexperienced to scale quickly enough and we ended up at the end of the year with the agreed quantity of games, but it would be hard to argue they were of the quality of our earlier releases. So the deal with Firebird soured, causing significant financial stress and ultimately the company dissolved and *Sidewize* was the last game I worked on there.

Why are Odin games denied on World Of Spectrum?

Simply, Paul McKenna and I are commercially



The technically impressive, if a tad frustrating, *Crosswize*.

exploiting the IP, through licensing and official remakes for example. It may sound harsh, but there's not much else to say.

What did you do next?

I went solo and did *Crosswize*, which I think contained my best work for the Spectrum. Then I went to work at Denton Designs and worked on an Atari ST game called *Gargantuan*. But although I have nothing bad to say about them, we didn't really gel and the game didn't get finished. I also helped with *Foxx Fights Back*; I did the core scrolling, sprite engine and core game logic for that, but John Heap finished it after I left and I'm not credited.

After Denton Designs you co-founded Eldritch The Cat.

Yep. We did a whole bunch of stuff over a few years. We worked on *Projectyle* for EA and an unreleased spoof superhero game called *FLOPS* (*Free League Of Pathetic Superheroes*). That featured characters such as Koi Carp, aka The Goldfish and the Black And White Knight Hobby Horses. Martin Calvert did a superb job with the art for *FLOPS* and it is truly a shame that it did not see the light of day. I worked briefly at a company that shall not be named, before joining EA UK. There I developed the Genesis version of *Risky Woods* and managed other games being developed internally such as the Amiga versions of *John Madden* and *Desert Strike*.

After Electronic Arts you moved to the US and joined Westwood.

My ex-business partner at Eldritch, Mark McCubbin, moved out to Vegas to work there and I was lucky enough to get an introduction through him. I was there for almost nine years and I worked on all the *Command & Conquer* games developed there as technical director. I was involved in a lot of other stuff such as *Kyrandia 3*, *Lands Of Lore* and *Dune 2000*, but I think *C&C* remains Westwood's best known work. I focused quite a lot of my time on multiplayer components – LAN and internet – and the Westwood online technology, which was used for quite a few games.



■ Wetherill tasted big success as technical director of mega-hit *Command & Conquer*.

IT WAS PRETTY HARD SEEING WESTWOOD FLAME OUT

You are involved in developing similar games at Kixeye?

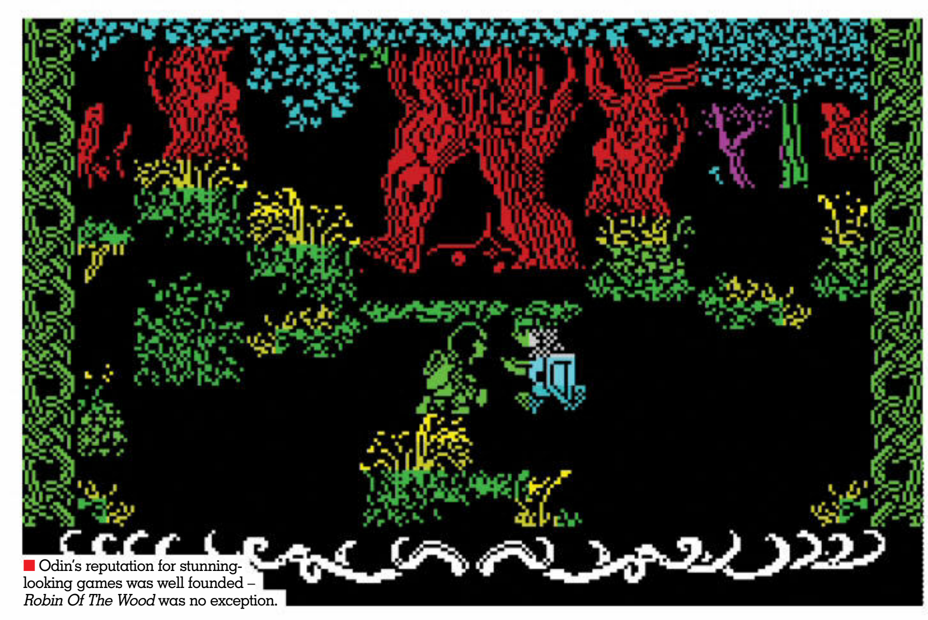
I've been here for about three years. What appealed to me most was the opportunity to work on RTS games in the context of a web browser. I've learned a lot here – the game I am working on now, *Battle Pirates*, had hundreds of thousands of lines of ActionScript and PHP. Flash games can be pretty serious business!

What has been your biggest challenge or the toughest part of your career?

It was pretty hard seeing Westwood flame out. At the end of 2001 it was clear to me that they would not be permitted by EA to work on any new projects. It was determined that the Las Vegas studio would no longer do RTS games and we would focus on MMO games and *C&C Renegade*. There was some effort to start *C&C 3* up in Vegas, but when we were told this was not going to happen, and *Renegade* shipped, I left. EA closed Westwood about a year after I left. Having said that, *Command & Conquer* was my favourite game to work on. It made a huge impact when it shipped, and I'm very proud to have played a part in that. My least favourite game was *Under Pressure*, development of which was probably a career low spot for reasons I won't go into. At least I was able to gain a little perspective from the experience.

Which time do you look back at most fondly, and how do you regard the industry today in comparison to the Eighties and Nineties?

I have really fond memories of working at Software Projects and Odin. It was a simpler time and we had a lot of fun. Westwood was fun too, but it was more complex by then, and the experience of living and working in America was life-changing. There was something pure about literally knowing a system inside and out back in the Eighties, and even the 16-bit era to a certain extent. These days, there are typically numerous levels of abstractions between you and the hardware, even with mobile phones. The original *C&C* ran on a 486/66mhz PC in 16mb. Modern phones are in the ghz range of clock speeds, with GBs of RAM. Still, we have better tools now – ZX Spectrum development today is so much nicer than back in the day. It's almost easy mode!



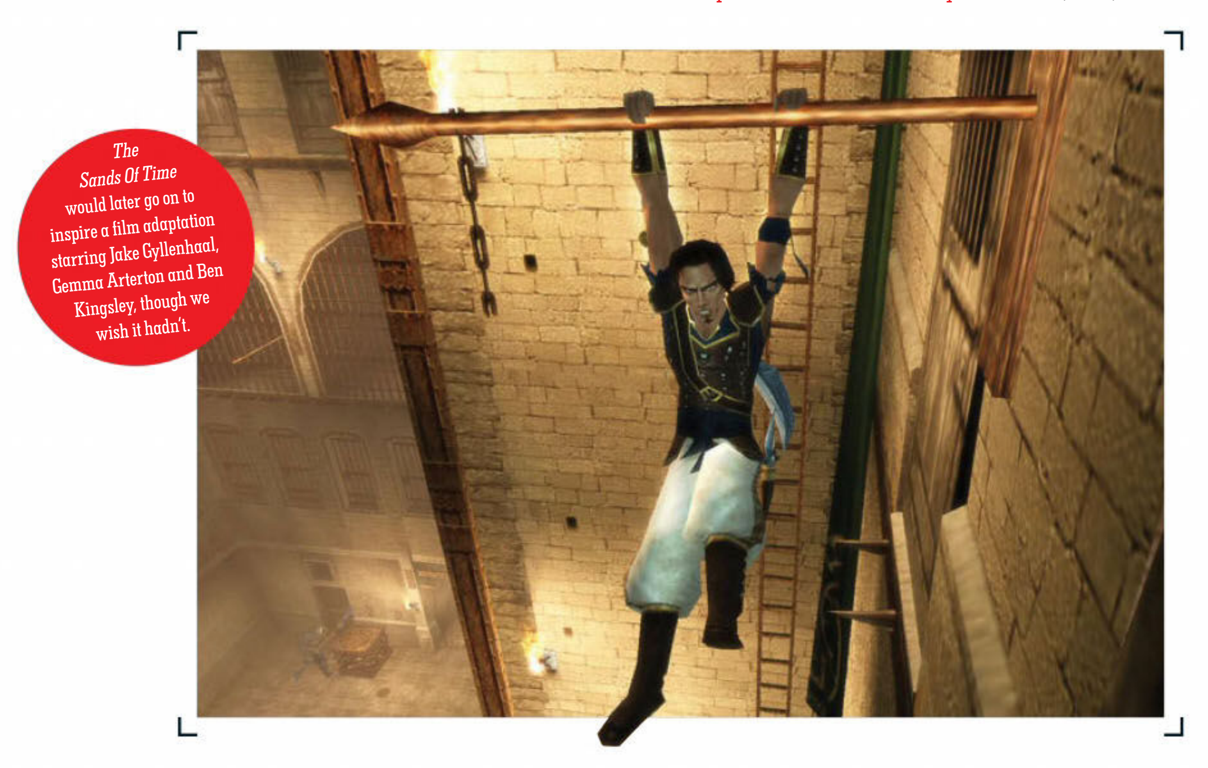
■ Odin's reputation for stunning-looking games was well founded – *Robin Of The Wood* was no exception.

GAME CHANGERS

PRINCE OF PERSIA: THE SANDS OF TIME

Released: 6 November 2003 **Publisher:** Ubisoft **Developer:** Ubisoft Montreal **System:** Xbox, PS2, GC

The Sands Of Time would later go on to inspire a film adaptation starring Jake Gyllenhaal, Gemma Arterton and Ben Kingsley, though we wish it hadn't.



The revival of a franchise that had been seemingly laid to rest, Ubisoft Montreal's parkour platformer changed the action-adventure genre forever

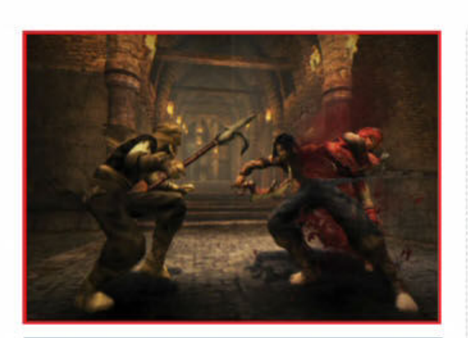
FOR THE STAFF of Ubisoft Montreal circa 2003, *One Thousand And One Nights* wasn't just source material used to inspire the design and writing of *Prince Of Persia: The Sands Of Time*, but also roughly the number of sunsets it took before the game, one of the most impressive action-adventure games of the sixth console generation, saw completion. *The Sands Of Time* wasn't only a killer reinvention of a legacy franchise – one that had lain dormant since 1993's *Prince of Persia 2: The Shadow And The Flame* (if we rightly ignore 1999's dire *Prince Of Persia 3D*) – but it also revitalised a genre that was in desperate need of new ideas.

As a game that was wholly obsessed with the Prince relying on the past to realise what lay ahead, *The Sands Of Time* staunchly planted both feet in the future and never dared look back. At the time it was praised for its visual engineering and game design, a direct result of the team at Ubisoft Montreal (led by original *Prince Of Persia* creator Jordan Mechner and eventual *Assassin's Creed* creator Patrice Désilets) pushing boundaries and never wavering from its original vision. The results are still impressive over a decade later, with *The Sands Of Time* offering a compelling storyline, a strong *Arabian Nights*-themed setting, and groundbreakingly slick animations to complement its stellar combat and level design.

This was all possible because Ubisoft Montreal took the Jade engine, originally built for 2003's *Beyond Good & Evil*, and twisted it like delirious contortionists. For a game that was built entirely around intricate movements and the ability to rewind environment scenarios at a button press, this would prove to be a problem across the two years of development, leading to over 150 versions of the game

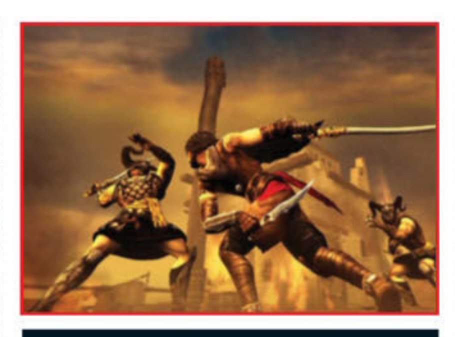
HOW THE SEQUELS FAILED

THE SANDS OF TIME STANDS ALONE AS A CLASSIC; HERE'S HOW THE SEQUELS STRUGGLED TO REPLICATE THE MAGIC



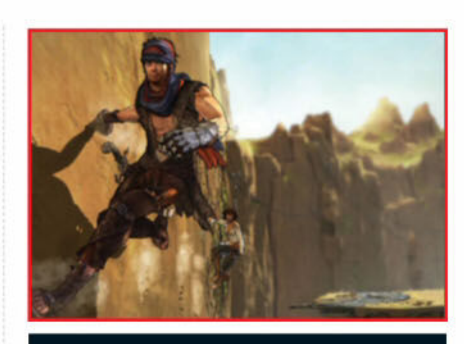
THE WARRIOR WITHIN

★ The sequel's shift in tone to a darker style, grittier feel and excessive violence all combined to help the series lose its charm and sense of adventure.



THE TWO THRONES

★ While the fun tone and familiar art style was restored, the intricate platforming puzzles and deep combat design of *The Sands Of Time* were not, making this sequel ultimately forgettable.



PRINCE OF PERSIA

★ In 2008, Ubisoft gave the new entry a pretty cel-shaded coat of paint, but sadly no substance. The story was silly and the puzzles were ruined by the lack of a fail state.

before it was released. But still the team persisted; it used level design to drive the micro-gameplay, from the Prince's fluid jump arcs to the behaviour of enemy AI at the behest of the memorable platforming.

The Sands Of Time was built on the foundations of three core-tenants: captivating character movements, intense fight sequences, and challenging levels that had the gameplay built specifically around them. It should come as little surprise that much of *The Sands Of Time* has stood the test of time, then. While the visuals have aged, the gameplay has not. The way the Prince dances between columns with wild abandon, flips between precariously placed ledges, and glides across derelict canopies at our control is as attention arresting today as it was back in 2003.

■■■ It all comes back to how everything was rooted in the level design. The story, while enthralling, was never overbearing – its tone, content and delivery mirrored the design of the game in that it was quick, condensed and had a tendency to catch you off-guard. The Prince's trademark acrobatics were tweaked and altered to better fit the pace of platforming and the puzzling positions it put you in, while enemy AI was further modified to get the Prince not only utilising his full array of animations, but the environment around him as well. In terms of content, delivery and tone, the *Prince Of Persia* sequels struggled to replicate its majesty – a further testament to the quality of *The Sands Of Time*.

And then there's the time-warping rewind and combat-infused slow-down mechanics to consider. *The Sands Of Time* works so well as a whole experience because it dares you to experiment with its designs to cross its landscape and best the enemies in the most enthralling and cinematic ways possible. While the game still ultimately featured a fail state – unlike the reboot that failed so spectacularly in 2008 – it imbued you with the desire to take risks; it gave you the opportunity to fail by first giving you the option of a small do-over first. Ultimately, being able to make use of this time mechanic is what established *The Sands Of Time* as a classic. Having the player constantly rewind and replay through its excellent environmental puzzles again and again ensured that they were forever etched into your brain.

The influence of *The Sands Of Time* is clear, inspiring developers not only to make better use of its spaces in adventure games moving forward, but to also look closely at how animation and movement can resonate so clearly with a player base. *Assassin's Creed* might be one of the biggest franchises in the industry now, but it wouldn't likely have gotten off the ground if Ubisoft Montreal hadn't first cut its teeth on this notably smaller parkour puzzler.

But there's something in the way the Prince moves through the environment with such grace and agility that we've never quite seen replicated again. There's an innocence and fluidity to it all; an innovative desire behind the entire package that makes the Prince of Persia feel like a breath of fresh air. The franchise might never reach the heights of *The Sands Of Time* again – so much of it has, after all, been borrowed, built upon and iterated over in the intervening years – but that doesn't make this 2003 game-changer any less of an experience that so strongly defined the creativity of a new generation of developers and consoles.

THE WAY THE PRINCE DANCES BETWEEN COLUMNS WITH WILD ABANDON IS AS ARRESTING TODAY AS IT WAS IN 2003

KEY FACTS

■ Ubisoft Montreal had to build 150 versions of the game before it was ready to 'go gold' – this was due to the huge array of bug problems that went hand-in-hand with many of the engine alterations the team made through development.

■ While the project started in 2001 without Jordan Mechner, a small seven-person team working up a prototype that impressed the original series creator so much that he joined Ubisoft Montreal for the project; lending direction to the art and gameplay direction of *The Sands Of Time*

GAME CHANGERS

BE KIND, REWIND

EIGHT GAMES THAT USED TIME-BENDING THEATRICS TO ENHANCE THE EXPERIENCE



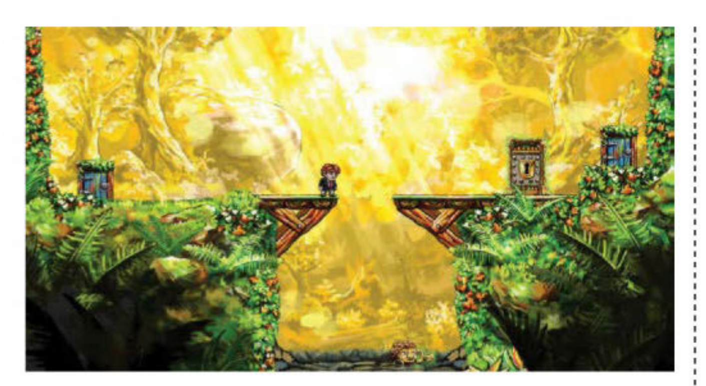
SUPER TIME FORCE

This pixel-art retro shooter saw players having to manipulate the flow of time to make it through some truly challenging moments of bullet-hell platforming. Upon death, time would be rewound and you'd get to play as a new character, fighting alongside a clone of the character you just played as, who runs through everything you just did – it's one of the weirdest (and most wonderful) co-op games out there.



LIFE IS STRANGE

A tale of two hipsters in small-town American suburbia, *Life Is Strange* is *Twin Peaks* as written by one of those laptop-wielding table-stealers in Starbucks. Thankfully, it makes great use of time manipulation – giving you the opportunity to try and affect the outcome of conversations and truly emotionally crushing moments as you attempt to circumvent the end of the world and rebuild old friendships.



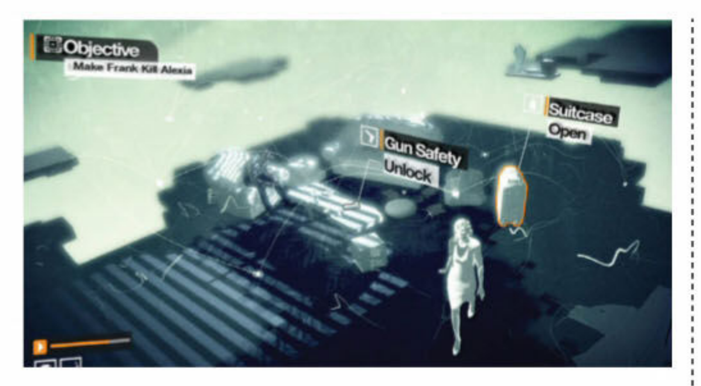
BRAID

Braid is without question one of the most celebrated puzzle games of the last generation, and for good reason. Not only did it blend a heart-warming story with beautifully drawn graphics, it also made great use of time manipulation mechanics. The rewind feature not only lets you account for trial and error, but is also used to great effect for puzzle solving.



FORZA MOTORSPORT 6

While some might regard it as cheating, *Forza Motorsport 6* makes great use of time rewind mechanics; and it does it all without any magical daggers. Take a corner too sharply, find yourself rammed off the course or forget to roll into the pit stop and you can rewind time, giving you the opportunity for a do-over on tricky parts of a track.



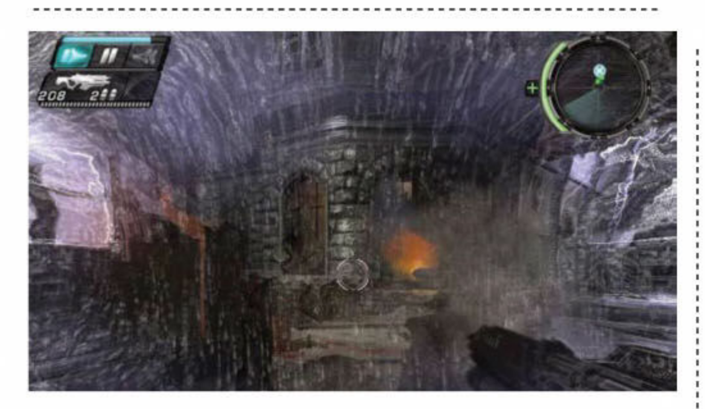
REMEMBER ME

Ironically, *Remember Me* was largely forgettable, but had sections that made pretty good use of time manipulation, letting you enter and rearrange a target's memories. Time could then be rewound and the memory replayed, giving you the chance to modify details and change a recollection to get the desired outcome in the present.



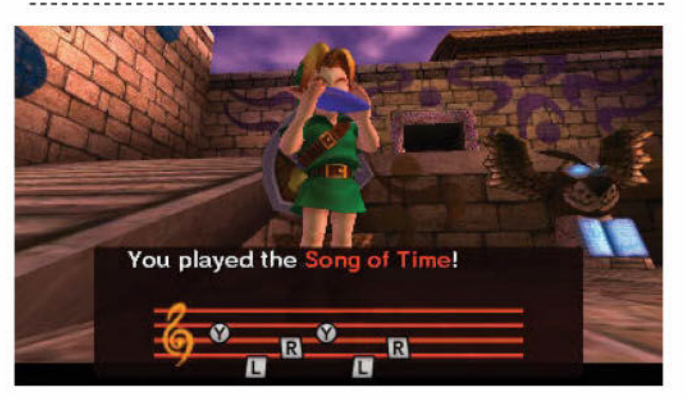
BLINX: THE TIME SWEEPER

This beloved Xbox classic lets you wield the master of all of the household chore items – a vacuum cleaner – and control time itself. The collection of Time Crystals lets Blinx rewind, fast forward, pause, record and slow the flow of time to help overcome puzzles, find hidden collectibles and kick ass in interesting combat scenarios.



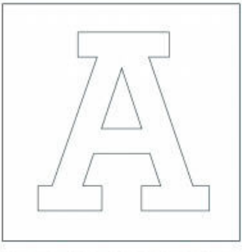
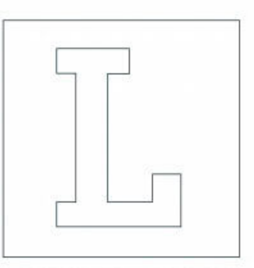
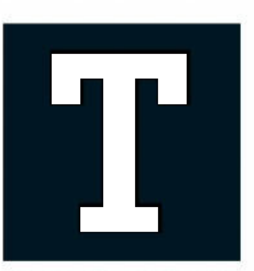
TIMESHIFT

Timeshift never quite survived the massive amounts of pre-release hype that was heaped onto its shoulders back in 2007, but Saber Interactive made good use of the Xbox 360 and PS3 technology to deliver this decisive time-splitting FPS. By slowing the flow of time, players were able to dodge incoming projectiles, steal weapons and blitz through active combat zones with ease.



THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: MAJORA'S MASK

For *The Legend Of Zelda* players, 6am is known as the beginning of the end. *Majora's Mask* is a stunning adventure game that sees the world ending in 72 hours, with Link forced to use his Ocarina to rewind the flow of time in an attempt to stop the moon from crashing into – and subsequently destroying – Termina.

THE 

VAULT



ALIENWARE 13R2

MANUFACTURER: **ALIENWARE** PRICE: **£1,298.99**

IT'S HARD TO believe that so much gaming power can be packed into such a small package, but Alienware's 13R2 proves that 13-inch laptops don't have to be underpowered. We tested the high-end model, which packed a Core i7 processor and an impressive 16GB RAM inside a surprisingly svelte frame, with graphics powered by NVIDIA's GeForce GTX 960M (with 2GB GDDR5). The result is a gaming laptop that performs extremely well – if you don't mind making a few compromises.

The biggest of these comes in the form of the battery life – we only got around three and a half hours out of the laptop while playing games like *Portal 2* on their highest settings, and the base of the machine got incredibly hot. You won't want to play while it sits on your lap, let's put it that way.

Thankfully, it makes up for these issues with some great performance and design. You'll find three USB 3.0 ports on the sides of the laptop, one of which is the new USB-C design. It also includes an HDMI, Alienware's own proprietary port for the optional £247 Graphics Amplifier, and – a big bonus for online gamers – a gigabit Ethernet port. The keyboard is lovely, too; the keys feel great and are spaced out well to minimise accidental presses. And, because this is Alienware, you can change the colours of the keyboard, the power button, the charger and the LEDs in the lid. Customisation is a big focus here, and we have to say: we love it.



DIY GAMER KIT

If you want to make games, why not start with something small before launching into a huge project? This DIY kit helps you to literally build your first console (solder included!) and code your first, simple games on the newly-constructed handheld.

www.firebox.com



FALLOUT 4 VAULT 111 WALLET

If you're over-encumbered and just don't have any space for all the pre-war money you're raking in, this is certainly the accessory for you. It features everyone's favourite mascot, Vault Boy, and has a clear window for ID.

www.thinkgeek.com



PORTAL: THE UNCOOPERATIVE CAKE ACQUISITION GAME

Take control of some test subjects as they desperately try to acquire slices of cake, and fight off opponents' subjects as the test centre crumbles around you in this surprisingly decent board game.

www.forbiddenplanet.com

GAMING CLOTHING



SUPER MOSCHINO LONG SLEEVE JUMPER

Mario goes back to his roots with this retro (and incredibly expensive) jumper, which depicts the portly plumber wielding a tool that he could *actually use for plumbing*. When was the last time that happened?
www.moschino.com



SUPER MOSCHINO RUCKSACK

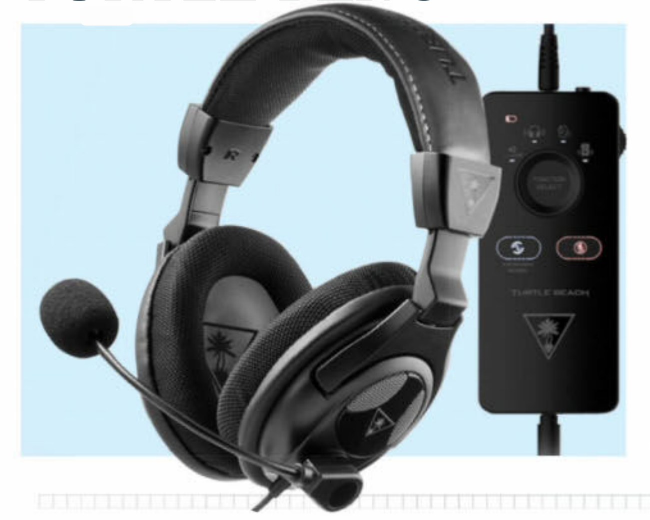
The Mario Brothers take point on this fashionable bag, with the Kooper Kids and a few of Mario's best-known foes also make an appearance. Flip it round, though, and Bowser will be all up in your face.
www.moschino.com



SUPER MOSCHINO CLUTCH

You can get this retro clutch bag with one of two designs – a grid of Mario coins or the same grid featuring stars. It's over £100, though, so finding cash to put in it may be a problem.
www.moschino.com

TURTLE BEACH EAR FORCE PX24



SOLD BY: **TURTLE BEACH** PRICE: **£69.99**

THIS HEADSET MANAGES to tread the ground between affordable and feature-packed rather well, with an in-line amplifier that gives you total control over your sound. The headset comes with a standard 3.5mm jack, so it works with the majority of controllers and consoles. The in-line amp can be a little annoying dangling from your head, but it's thankfully an optional aspect of the headset. Sound quality is really decent, and the different sound options on the amp allow you to choose your preferred setup – from surround sound to chat audio boost.
www.turtlebeach.com

TURTLE BEACH RECON 60P

SOLD BY: **TURTLE BEACH** PRICE: **£39.99**

THIS USB-CONNECTED headset is mainly designed with PS3 and PS4 in mind, but if you don't mind losing the in-line amp's functionality then you can just plug the headset into a 3.5mm jack instead, as it's compatible with most devices. For the price point, though, you do get a fair bit, as you might expect – you won't get the loudest sound without the amp set up, but the quality is as good as we've come to expect from Turtle Beach, and while they're a little plasticky, they're a good upgrade from a bundled headset. Definitely a worthwhile buy for the price, even if it doesn't look as swish as you might like.
www.turtlebeach.com



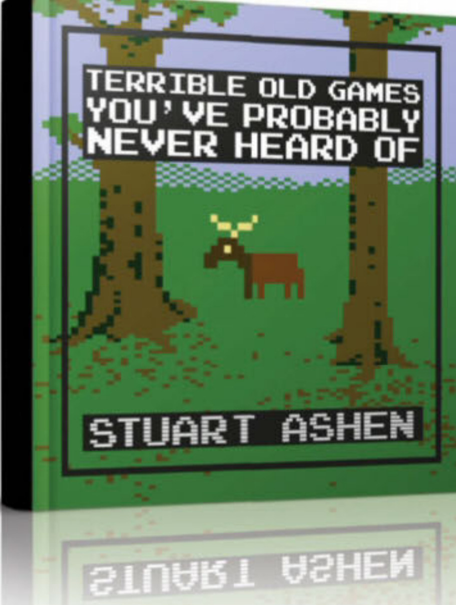
TURTLE BEACH STEALTH 420X



SOLD BY: **TURTLE BEACH** PRICE: **£149.99**

THIS IS AN expensive headset, but if you're looking for great sound, a excellent microphone and totally wireless operation then this could be the way to go. This particular model is Xbox One only, though a PS4 equivalent is also available. The controls for the headset are all on the cups themselves, so you may be reaching up a fair few times, but with several audio presets to boost bass and treble, a genuinely impressive battery life (around 14 hours in our tests) and fantastic sound, this is a great choice.
www.turtlebeach.com





TERRIBLE OLD GAMES YOU'VE PROBABLY NEVER HEARD OF

PUBLISHER: **UNBOUND**

WHETHER OR NOT you're a fan of YouTuber Ashens, if you love gaming and don't mind having a few laughs thrown in with your knowledge then you'll enjoy this collection. Bringing together some truly atrocious old games and explaining in hilarious detail why you should avoid them, Stuart Ashen breaks everything down for you in a smart little bundle of titles. On the whole, it's a very personal journey through some of retro gaming's most forgettable and disposable games. Ashen makes no claim that he's attempting to list the worst games of all time, just the ones he found personally interesting and abhorrent. Such a curated guide feeds into the personable tone of the whole book. It feels a little like browsing through someone's game collection and being given a whole back story on each one.

Additional restriction have been placed on what could qualify for this list, adding to the justification of why these are bad old games you've never heard of. They were all released between 1980 and 1995 and were released on home computer systems, not consoles. That might well mean that there's a bunch of pretty terrible titles you were hoping to see in this book that don't pop up, but what's here offers quite a journey of discovery as it is.

There are great write-ups on the history of each game, what it was often ripping off, whether it got any review scores and what formats you might be able to torture yourself by playing it on. Highlights include *Bionic Granny*, *Crazy Kong* and *SQIJ!*. Nostalgic fun for those who remember and an amusing jaunt for the rest.

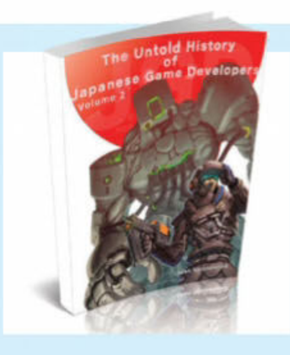
VERDICT 8/10



TOTAL WAR ROME: THE SWORD OF ATTILA

David Gibbins pairs extensive research with engaging fiction to create an exciting and historically accurate account of AD 439 in the Roman Empire. For fans of the Total War series, or those looking for a historical story to dive into, this is highly recommended.

www.amazon.com



THE UNTOLD HISTORY OF JAPANESE GAME DEVELOPERS: VOLUME 2

While packed with near-unbelievable stories of Japanese game development, some gamers may find the appeal limited – this really is aimed at those who loved games in the 8- and 16-bit era – but there's still plenty to love.

www.createspace.com



THE ART OF TOM CLANCY'S THE DIVISION

This might only be on pre-order at the moment, but for those that want to get a more detailed look into Ubisoft's apocalyptic New York streets, this is the place to come. It's packed with over 300 images and in-depth commentary from the artists.

www.titanbooks.com



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